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OR,

Yank Yellowbird's Castle Crusade.

BY WM. H. MANNING,
AUTHOR OF "YANK YELLOWBIRD," "WILD
WEST WALT," "GOLD GAUNTLET," "WILD
DICK TURPIN," "HOT HEART," "BLUFF
BURKE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I. A DANGEROUS GUEST.

HIGH up among the mountains of Montana lay the mining-town of Sassajack. Standing in the village, itself, its great elevation would hardly be realized by any one, for it lay in the valley called The Golden Moon, and the highest peaks of the Rocky Mountain range were far above them both.

Sassajack was not a large place; it was not an old place, dating from the time the first shanty was built; it was not a particularly attractive place; but it was a fair sample of Western mining-towns, and was free from any turbulent element.

At least, it had been up to the time referred

SUDDENLY A DEEP ROAR BURST UPON THEIR EARS; THEN THE CASTLE SEEMED TO RISE IN THE AIR.

to, but one day might at any time change its whole character.

One midsummer day nearly all the gold-diggers ceased work two hours earlier than usual; a proceeding for which they believed they had ample excuse.

That evening Sassajack was to enjoy a novelty; a ball was to be given at the Big Pocket Hotel. Previous to that day the men of Sassajack had been too busy to think of such things, but Pierre Ayot, the keeper of the hotel, had had an eye to the main chance, and this ball was the result.

The idea had been received with great satisfaction by all, and when Ayot stated that he would have fine musicians present, he added another drop to the bucket.

The population of Sassajack was one hundred and twenty-one persons. Of these, ninety-eight were men; eight were children; and fifteen were women, the fair sex being unusually well represented, considering the location of the mining camp.

Only thirteen could be counted upon for dancing, and at least three times as many men intended to go upon the floor. The scarcity of ladies was the one cause of dissatisfaction.

Shortly before dark Wells Parkman and Asa Jackingham were walking just outside the village proper. They were friends and mining partners, being the owner of Claim 22, and, having made ready for the evening, were sauntering about idly.

Both were men on the bright side of thirty, and, in a certain way, were rather good-looking.

Passing through the sparsely-wooded east side of the valley, they came suddenly upon a third man. He was not like them; he was not young; he was not good-looking.

Forty years of life had gone hard with him, especially in point of weight. His frame was of medium size, but he was thin to the point of emaciation. He had raven-black hair—still without many threads of gray—and a black mustache which was long and slender, and which pointed toward each ear like the index finger of a half-closed hand. His eyes were black, and, at times, large, but there were moments when the lids proper, and the corners, as well, drew toward the iris until the latter seemed crouching in ambush. His complexion was swarthy, and the skin tightly drawn over his chin, cheek-bones, nose and forehead.

This man gave the name of Steelblade, and was little known and little liked in Sassajack. He mined alone, and confided in nobody. Eccentric, surly at times, secretive and skulking, he was by no means a good sample of the gold-digger.

When not surly he was servilely polite, and such was his mood on this occasion.

"Good-evening, masters," he said, with a purring voice and a low bow.

"Good-evening," Parkman curtly replied.

"A fine evening, gentlemen."

"Yes."

"I see that you will attend the ball."

"You don't see anything of the sort."

"What! are you not going?"

"We shall, if we see fit."

"Pardon, master, but I hardly understand—"

"In a word, Steelblade, don't presume too much; don't say whether we will go or not. What is it to you?"

Steelblade bowed most humbly.

"Pardon, master," he servilely replied; "I did not intend to offend you. I saw that you were dressed, so I ventured to speak."

"We are not your associates, Steelblade."

"Certainly not, master; I would not presume to put myself upon a level with you. I know my place. I know I am low and humble, while you—"

"Spare your hypocrisy. You are a dog I don't like, but nobody carries a less humble heart than you, my man. Don't play a false part with us."

"Fortune forbid, master; I would not dream of trying to deceive you. Let me, however, admire from a distance. Friends of yours at Yellow Drift are my friends, too."

He was as servile as ever in his way, but his words made both Parkman and Jackingham start. Their career had not been one they would care to have the world know, and they at once suspected that Steelblade knew of certain events at Yellow Drift. They saw a secret threat in this allusion, and knew that he was not a man they wanted for an enemy.

Parkman tried to cover his confusion with a question.

"Do you attend the ball, Steelblade?"

"Ay, master."

"And carry that butcher-knife?"

He pointed to Steelblade's belt. Above this showed the handle of a knife; below it protruded a long, keen, murderous-looking blade. Sheath there was none.

The man drew this knife and looked at it with an admiring, almost tender expression.

"Ay, master," he answered; "where I go, Bright Eyes goes, too."

"Bright Eyes" was the name he bestowed upon the knife. He now took it by the tip of the blade with his thumb and index finger and

flung it twenty feet in the air. It revolved from end to end like a wheel, the blade flashing in the last rays of the sun, and looked a dangerous thing to intercept, but he put out his hand and deftly caught it by the handle.

"We never part—Bright Eyes and I," he added.

"I hate the sight of the cursed thing!" exclaimed Jackingham, with a shiver.

"Nay, master, say not so; Bright Eyes is dangerous only to my enemies. You are my friends, but let my enemies 'ware of Bright Eyes!"

His black eyes suddenly grew small, and the pupils seemed to shrink back in ambush and threaten like a snake in coil.

"I doubt if they'll have Bright eyes at the ball," observed Parkman.

"They must, master."

"What if they keep you out?"

"They will not."

"Take care how you make a disturbance. You are not liked in Sassajack—"

"Pardon, but I shall be as humble as a dove, I go because I have business. Rest easy, masters. When another day dawns go you to your neighbors and inquire, 'How behaved Steelblade?' Rest easy; there will be a good report."

Again he flung Bright Eyes high in air, catching it neatly as it fell.

"I believe you are the devil!" exclaimed Asa Jackingham, for there was something oppressively weird, secret, unnatural and ominous about the man with the knife.

"We are not all alike, masters," humbly submitted Steelblade. "You and your friend, master Jackingham, work Claim 22. Claim 21 is worked by Gladiator Gabe and Rube Herndon. Very different are they from you. Master Gabe is a big-hearted giant whose nature is simple as a child's. Master Herndon is a quiet man, but his will is like iron and his brain quick as a flash. A hard man to fool, masters."

"Why do you prate of them?" Parkman asked, irritably.

"Because you don't love them half as well as they are loved by the Rand sisters."

Both Parkman and Jackingham showed sudden signs of anger.

"Why do you prate of them?" fiercely repeated Parkman, glaring at Steelblade.

The latter's eyes again went into ambush.

"I advertise myself now, masters," he replied. "I am a useful friend, and, knowing what I know, I may some day be useful to you. If I am wanted, let me know, Bright Eyes and I are always to be hired, and we work well!"

At the last words he flung the murderous knife into the air for the third time, on this occasion at such an angle that, after its high ascent, it bade fair to fall sixty feet away; but, darting away like a greyhound, he caught it as it came down, and, never slackening his speed or looking around, he went on fleetly until the trees concealed him from their view.

Jackingham shivered again.

"A veritable fiend, if there ever was one!" he exclaimed.

"Or a madman," added Parkman.

"He has too much method for that."

"You are right, taking the word in its extreme meaning, though he may be deranged. He is peculiar—as peculiar as a nightmare."

"And more deadly."

"Did he frighten you?"

"Yes," Jackingham boldly avowed. "He recalled a book of old German tales which I once read; Steelblade reminds me of the devil; by my life, he does!"

"Then you must know both gentlemen."

"I fancy both know us!" Jackingham retorted.

"Beyond question, and, to return to Steelblade, did you notice his allusion to our past lives?"

"Yes."

"We can't offend the wretch."

"I should say not."

"Therefore, let us please him. As he said, he and his villainous knife may yet be useful to us. He had just as soon stab a man in the back as not."

"Even us."

"Little danger of that; he plainly wants to be on friendly terms with us. We will let him. In a mining-camp you can choose your friends without hesitation; one party or the other is sure to drift away before long."

"Did you notice his allusion to the Rand girls, Rube Herndon and that overgrown booby, Gladiator Gabe?"

"Rather!"

"Suppose we send Steelblade and his knife to Claim 21 some dark night?"

"Go light, Asa; go light. It may not come to that. I believe my eyes are as sharp as any man's, and I can't see that Isabel and Ruth prefer Herndon and Gabe to us. If we find that they do—time enough to saddle the kicking mule then."

The two men went no further, but wandered back to the shanty which stood upon their claim. When they reached it a tall, powerfully-built young man standing by the shanty south of theirs—that upon Claim 21.

"Gladiator Gabe, in all his finery!" sneered Jackingham. "What a clumsy heap of flesh!"

"He goes to lay siege to the heart of Isabel Rand," Parkman coolly replied. "In the game to-night, Asa, we want to play trumps."

CHAPTER II.

MYSTERIOUS SANDY WHISKERS.

THE evening festivities were in full blast. Sassajack, like "Belgium's capital," had gathered her "beauty and her chivalry," and nearly everybody seemed to be enjoying the ball greatly. Nor was the scarcity of ladies so much felt as had been expected. Many of the men who had purposed dancing found that hard work in the Montana mines had deprived their muscles of their former elasticity, and were content to withdraw in a short time.

Still, the ladies were decidedly in the minority, and competition and jealousy among the men was the natural result.

There was one man who could dance, and dance well, too, who had not gone on the floor. This was Steelblade, the Knife-Thrower. Indeed, he had not been in the hall over five minutes, when he entered, looked the scene over, and then quietly went out.

An hour later he again approached the hotel, coming to the rear, where Mr. Ayot had set out several young trees and had a grove growing. The hotel was only a two-storied affair, and as the sleeping rooms were on the second floor, the hall was on the first.

The sleeping rooms, by the way, though few in number, had never yet been filled, but Ayot expected they would be when Sassajack had grown to be a city—if it ever did.

Owing to the location of the hall, Steelblade could stand on the ground and look inside. This he intended to do at once, but he was delayed by a discovery.

He was not the only man who was utilizing this means of observation; some one else was looking in through the window.

The other person was a man of middle age; a tall, broad-shouldered man who would weigh very nearly two hundred pounds, yet not a handsome man to look at in any way. His form was not compact, but seemed to have been loosely thrown together. Each separate part looked unwieldy and clumsy.

The same remarks will apply to his features, which were coarse, heavy, prominent and, it seemed none too intelligent. His hair was a shade of red, and his beard of a color which had given him the only name by which he was known in camp—"Sandy Whiskers."

When he came to Sassajack he selected a claim well up the Golden Moon Valley and began mining alone. Meek and unobtrusive of nature, he sought nobody's society and made no acquaintances. Men did not know his name, so they gave him one to suit themselves, and "Sandy Whiskers" was the chosen sobriquet.

He had been eight months in camp, and, though regarded as scrupulously honest and well-meaning by many of the other miners, he was still but little known. Working alone, he lived his quiet, placid life unmolested by his neighbors. When addressed by them he answered in a gentle, humble voice, and gave rise to a general belief that he was weak-minded.

Steelblade was surprised to see the other watcher, and for awhile he stood looking over with cat-like closeness and secrecy. Then he suddenly touched the broad, heavy shoulder nearest him.

The man did not start, he looked around quietly.

"Good-evening Mr. Whiskers," saluted the Knife-Thrower, blandly.

"Good-evenin' sir," was the mild reply.

"Why ain't you dancing?"

"Me?" answered Sandy Whiskers, wonderingly. "I don't dance, sir."

"You look capable of it."

"I never danced in my life. I'm afeerd my feet," and he looked down at those generously-formed parts of his anatomy, "wouldn't take up good."

"Do you like music?"

"No."

"What are they playing?"

Sandy Whiskers gave an ear to the music, his expression remaining dull and phlegmatic.

"I don't know," he confessed.

"Is it a waltz or an anthem?"

"I reelly don't know."

Sandy Whiskers seemed to speak the truth: at least, Steelblade believed him, and wondered more than ever why the man was there.

"Why don't you go in and enjoy yourself?"

"Me?" with a start. "Why, I should be as much out o' place as a buffler."

"Then why are you here?" asked Steelblade, and his eyes grew small until the pupils lurked like a cat ready for a spring.

Sandy Whiskers turned his gaze full upon the questioner.

"Will they object?" he asked, in a troubled way. "I only came to—to—"

"To what, did you say?" blandly asked Steelblade, squinting more than ever.

"I was passin' by, ye see, an' I looked in. I

ain't done no harm. They won't care, will they?"

Sandy Whiskers showed embarrassment and anxiety, but Steelblade shook his head.

"I don't know. Perhaps I could tell, if you would inform me *why* you came. What do you want here, Mr. Whiskers?"

The Knife-Thrower had been transformed from a servile inferior to a sharp questioner. He had found a man really more humble than he pretended to be, and enjoyed his triumph. He was also perplexed by his companion's conduct. What could Sandy Whiskers want there?

The big man shifted his weight uneasily from one foot to the other, and, beset by the last question, changed color perceptibly. It was as though he had been detected in some mean or guilty act.

Circumstances saved him from a reply.

Two persons came out of the hall, as though to seek fresh air. Both of the watchers started, and in a moment Steelblade was concealed by a shrub. He had gone with a quick, lithe motion very like him. Sandy Whiskers stood dazed and startled, looking straight at the couple who had come from the hall—a man and a young lady.

"I suppose I shall not be left in peace," said the latter, with a sigh, "and I am dreadful tired of dancing."

"Why not make sure of your safety, Miss Rand?" asked her companion.

"How can I?"

"Let us walk in the grove."

"A happy suggestion, Mr. Herndon, and I will go. Thank you for helping me out of my dilemma."

They passed on, and Sandy Whiskers drew a deep, panting sigh. He raised one broad hand to his face, but the hand which could drive a pick deep into hard soil trembled pitifully now.

He followed them, and Steelblade, watching from his covert, put his evil eyes into ambush again, doubly beset as he was with wonder.

"I'll follow!" decided the swarthy-faced man, dropping his hand upon "Bright Eyes," half-unconsciously. "There may be fun ahead."

Sandy Whiskers had forgotten the Knife-Thrower entirely, and, stepping as lightly as he could, he moved after the young couple. He knew them both; their names were Ruth Rand and Rube Herndon.

Why he should be interested in them was not so clear.

Miss Rand and Herndon went on several rods and then sat down upon a rustic bench. The night was calm, clear and beautiful; the moon was riding high in the sky, and patches of silver were alternated with erratic dark spots in the grove. A quiet, enticing scene, and the wanderers seemed to feel its power.

Who, on the favorable side of twenty-five, would not?

Perhaps this couple found pleasure in each other's society. Ruth Rand was a beautiful girl, and Herndon was bold, intelligent, honest and refined in his ways. His face, too, was manly and attractive. Considering the part he is to play in this history it is a matter of congratulation that he was not "handsome!"

There was a good deal of truth in the opinion advanced by some one that "handsome men are either villains or fools."

While they sat there and talked, Sandy Whiskers stood a few yards away and watched breathlessly. He did not attempt to get near enough to overhear what they were saying, but stood like a statue and looked unwaveringly.

And while he did so, Steelblade watched him. The Knife-Thrower twisted his eyes into numerous and diversified ambushes, and racked his brains to understand it.

"Is he mad?" wondered Steelblade. "Or is he a fool? Or is he sharper than a needle? Sdeath! I know not, he beats me."

Unconscious of the double espionage upon them, Herndon and Ruth Rand talked on until the former was obliged to confess that an engagement in the ball-room would take him away, much as he regretted it.

"But will you come out again?" he asked.

"I dare not make a promise as rash as that if I once go inside; I shall be beset with invitations to dance. Wait! I will go with you to the door, and then do you send Isabel out to join me—if you can."

Herndon readily agreed. They walked to the door, and then he went in alone. There was a brief delay, and then a second young lady came out and joined Ruth. It was her sister, Isabel.

"Come away!" said the latter, quickly. "I have danced until I *won't* dance any more at present, and as I had to run the gantlet to get out here, it follows that danger will beset us if we stay here."

"Follow me," Ruth answered; "I will find a place where no one will discover us. It is a place which will delight you, I know—it did me."

"You forget that Mr. Herndon was with you," significantly observed Isabel. "You won't feel offended if I say that you had a superior attraction then."

Ruth unclosed her lips to defend herself with

mock indignation, but, suddenly, a man rushed in front of them and threw up his arms wildly.

"Stop!" he exclaimed, wildly. "For your lives, don't go that way!"

CHAPTER III.

A STARTLING ACCUSATION.

RUTH and Isabel came to a sudden stop, and then looked in surprise and alarm at the man who had confronted them so strangely. Both knew him by sight; it was Sandy Whiskers. In the absence of any actual acquaintance they believed that he was a harmless, well-meaning man, and after the first shock they thought only of his warning.

Isabel, always brave and clear-headed, was the first to speak.

"What is wrong?" she asked.

"Don't go that way," Sandy Whiskers replied in an agitated voice.

"Why not?"

"Thar is danger."

"What danger?"

Met by this straightforward question the big miner's manner suddenly changed. His lower jaw fell; his face assumed a blank expression; and he stared at them in hopeless vacancy.

"What is the danger?" Isabel persisted.

Sandy Whiskers's face flushed and his manner became embarrassed. Once more he began to shift his weight uneasily from foot to foot, and for a time he found no words. When he did he muttered, rather than spoke:

"I don't know."

"Then why do you say there is danger?"

"I—I thought there was," he stammered.

"Why did you think so?"

"I—I don't know."

Isabel breathed a sigh of relief which was not unmixed with pity. She had decided that the alleged danger began and ended in Sandy Whiskers's mind, and all previous impressions assumed the form of present conviction—he was decidedly weak-minded, if not deranged.

"Come, Ruth," she said, kindly, "let us go on."

She advanced a step, but the strange miner's face assumed a startled look.

"No, no; don't do it!" he cried, excitedly.

"Really," answered Isabel, more firmly, "you must not oppose us in this way, sir. Please step aside and let us go on."

She essayed to pass him, but he stepped so abruptly in front of her that she only avoided a collision by suddenly recoiling; and then he again flung out his arms wildly and hoarsely exclaimed:

"No, no; for yer lives, don't go!"

The startled girls receded. The motion of his arms was like an attempt to seize them, and his excited manner gave the finishing touch to their fears. Believing that the man was insane, they turned and hurried back toward the hotel without another word to him.

He did not follow, but stood perfectly still looking after them. His face was then in shadow, and it gave no clew to a person who was watching the scene in perplexity.

Steelblade crouched beside a bush and, handling "Bright Eyes" mechanically, almost closed his snaky eyes as he surveyed Sandy Whiskers and tried to understand his conduct.

Isabel and Ruth hurried back toward the hall.

"I believe the man is crazy," said Isabel, "and I am tempted to complain to Mr. Ayot and have him driven away. He is certainly crazy or very impudent."

"I don't think he intended any harm," Ruth replied, "so let us do him no injustice."

"Perhaps you are right; indeed, I believe you are. He is weak-minded, to say the least, and probably has trouble enough of his own. We will not be the ones to add to it."

With this merciful decision they returned to the hall, and Sandy Whiskers was for the time forgotten.

There was one thing in connection with the Rand sisters which no one could fail to see. Each had two earnest, not to say determined, suitors. There had been more at one time, and they might have had their choice of a score; but most of the miners had found the race too warm for them, and all but these four withdrew.

Isabel's admirers were Gabriel Dix and Asa Jackingham. Ruth's were Reuben Herndon and Wells Parkman.

It was an odd chance that Dix and Herndon were friends and partners in working Claim 21, while Parkman and Jackingham were friends and partners in working Claim 22. The shanties occupied by the rivals in love and gold-digging were only a few yards apart. Each, therefore, knew a good deal about the others' affairs, but only by observation. There was no friendship between them, and though no quarrel had occurred, friendly conversation was not indulged in. If they talked at all, there was an undercurrent of venom in what was said.

Of the four men, Gabriel Dix was, at first sight, the most impressive looking. Men called him Gladiator Gabe, and he deserved the sobriquet. Standing six feet in his boots, he had a physical development to match his height, his chest being broad and full, and his limbs long and

large; but he was finely proportioned, and graceful for one of his size.

His chestnut-colored hair was worn just long enough to curl freely all over his head, but was not allowed to fall upon his shoulders. His broad face was honest, earnest, and manly, but a close observer would have detected that he was a man better qualified to follow a good leader than to be a leader himself. His nature was not aggressive.

He was happy the evening of the ball, even though he danced but little. In a certain way the gathering pleased him, but had it not been for Isabel Rand, nothing could have tempted him to dance.

He did not consider himself an expert, and he was about right.

At last the dancing ended, and only one more event remained—the supper. Landlord Ayot had calculated that no man would be willing to pay him for a supper unless he secured a lady, and he found his impression verified; only thirty persons announced their intention to remain to the meal, and they were all in "couples."

The hall was the only place in the hotel where tables could be set for thirty persons, so the dancers were asked to vacate for a few minutes, and the servants came in.

They proceeded to set the tables rapidly.

Then, and not until then, did Sandy Whiskers venture inside the hotel. He came as far as the hall door and stood looking at the scene.

Once more a hand touched his arm; once more he turned and saw Steelblade.

"Do you eat, Mr. Whiskers?" asked the Knife-Thrower, blandly.

"Me?" Sandy Whiskers replied. "No."

"Why not?"

"I ain't hungry."

"Then suppose we go home. I'll walk with you."

It was an experiment, for he did not believe that the lone miner would go.

His impression was confirmed.

"I ain't ready," replied the man, with a slight show of annoyance.

"What do you want here?"

The meek, patient eyes were turned upon Steelblade.

"I ain't doin' no harm, be I?"

"But what do you want?"

The Knife-Thrower was no longer servile. In the presence of a really humble man his arrogance arose, and he showed himself the merciless bully that he really was. He was thwarted, however. Sandy Whiskers passed his hand confusedly over his face, and then, with headlong speed, hastened away.

Steelblade allowed him to go unmolested.

In a short time supper was ready. The hall had been aired and improved, and most of the guests sat down in high spirits.

There were at least two exceptions to this rule, and Parkman and Jackingham were secretly cursing their ill-luck. Each had requested the pleasure of taking one of the Rand sisters to the table, only to find them previously engaged. Herndon and Dix had improved their chances and won the prizes.

Parkman had one antidote for his disappointment. He managed to get a place next to Ruth, after all, and there was some consolation in being near her, if he did have to put up with Miss Augusta Norris as his partner.

The supper began with a flow of merry conversation and due attention to the eatables, but a figurative thunderbolt soon descended upon them.

Ruth Rand had taken a spoon and moved it toward her cup of tea, intending to dip some of the tea from the cup, when a big brown hand suddenly snatched the cup away. Then followed a crash, and the cup lay on the floor broken into a score of pieces.

"Don't ye drink it!" cried a hoarse voice. "Don't ye touch the stuff, for it is p'izoned, an' thar is the man that did it!"

The voice was audible to half the people in the hall, and they impulsively sprung to their feet.

A singular tableau was revealed.

With Ruth on one side and Parkman on the other, there stood Sandy Whiskers, pointing to Parkman. The lone miner's face was pale and distorted, and his expression was one of horror.

"He put p'izen in the tea," the accuser persisted, still keeping his finger leveled.

"You fool!" cried Parkman, "what do you mean?"

"I mean jest what I say."

"Do you say that I tried to poison the tea?"

"Yes."

"Then you're a liar, and if you don't take your words back, I'll make you. You idiotic scoundrel, take your choice right away—I mean business!"

Pale with rage, Parkman confronted Sandy Whiskers belligerently, and it was clear that he meant to keep his word.

But what meant Sandy Whiskers's accusation?

CHAPTER IV.

THE LONE MINER'S PERIL.

LANDLORD AYOT pushed to the front, determined to put things to rights at once. He

moved with his sympathies all in favor of Parkman. The latter was an honored guest; Sandy Whiskers was a fellow who had only come to the ball in time to make a disturbance.

Ayot caught him by the shoulder savagely. "You lunatic, you!" he cried, "what do you mean?"

"You heerd me, didn't you?" asked the lone miner, with more courage than usual.

"What did you say?"

"I said he put p'ison in the gal's tea."

Sandy Whiskers pointed out Parkman again. The latter ground out some fierce retort between his teeth and took a forward step, but Ayot motioned him back.

"Wait a bit, Parkman. Now, Sandy Whiskers, tell us upon what you base your charge?"

"He changed the two cups o' tea."

"What of that?"

"He had put a white powder in his cup, and—"

"It's a lie!" shouted Parkman; "a foul lie. I did change the cups of tea, but it was because tea-leaves and tea-stems were floating on top of Miss Rand's cap. I did it partly as a joke. Am I not right, Miss Rand?"

"Yes," Ruth reluctantly replied.

"As for the charge that I put poison in the cup," added Parkman, "it is an out-and-out lie."

"He did it!" persisted Sandy Whiskers.

The lone miner stood among the others with an unusually bold air, his gaze fixed stubbornly upon Parkman.

"You scoundrel!" hissed the latter, "I'll fix you for this!"

"Wouldn't it be well to learn upon what he bases his charge?"

The question came in a cool, undisturbed voice, and Rube Herndon moved forward a step. He was a strongly-built young man, with a magnificent form—though not a large man—and his face was manly, intelligent and full of firmness; not a "handsome" face, but that of a man whom no danger could appall or frustrate.

"Do you back him up?" sharply cried Parkman.

"I back nobody up—at present," coolly replied Herndon. "What I suggest is, let the man explain."

"Just so, Sandy Whiskers," resumed Ayot. "Tell your story, or— Well, tell your story."

"He emptied a white powder from a paper into the tea," affirmed the lone miner, and once again he doggedly pointed to Parkman.

"Once more, he lies!" shouted Parkman.

Miss Augusta Norris touched the speaker's arm.

"I have a theory," she said. "Did you put sugar in the tea?"

"Yes."

"I know you did, for I saw you—"

"Her word is not to be took!" cried Sandy Whiskers; "she is his confederate. I seen him show her the paper afore he put the powder in the tea."

Miss Norris laughed lightly.

"That settles it," she replied. "Mr. Parkman, don't you remember what you showed me?"

Parkman's hand flashed to his pocket, and he took out a white paper folded much as a druggist folds papers around small quantities of medicine.

"That's the one," put in Sandy Whiskers. "Look on it now, an' see ef you can't find traces o' the powder."

"They shall look!" cried Parkman.

He opened the paper in the sight of all, and there lay—a few minute particles of gold.

"See for yourselves," the speaker added. "These grains of yellow stuff I found two miles away, on nobody's claim, and put them into this paper as a safe way of carrying them. I thought of them since we sat down to the table, and took out the paper and showed them to Miss Norris."

"Didn't you see them, too, Ruth?" asked Miss Norris.

"Yes."

"And did you see me put the sugar in the tea?" asked Parkman.

"I did."

"Then all is clear. This meddling fool has seized upon a very trifling circumstance, and made a great racket about it. I put nothing else in the tea. Great heavens! why should I wish to injure Miss Rand? And if I had wished to, would I run the risk of poisoning her here, where thirty persons might see me?"

"That is irresistible logic," added Ayot, "and, as I expected, this crazy fool is on the wrong track. You old tramp! how dare you accuse a gentleman thus?"

"I told the truth," muttered Sandy Whiskers, though he was plainly growing uneasy. "I seen the paper—"

"Did you see what was in it?"

"No, but—"

"There are no 'buts' to it! The testimony of Miss Norris proves you a liar."

"She didn't tell the truth. She's in the plot with him, an'—"

"Now see here," and Ayot's hand fell heavily upon the lone miner's shoulder, "you've said enough. I won't have my honored guests insulted and outraged by such a vagabond as you.

I reckon a good horsewhipping will do you good. Boys, take him out and—"

Isabel Rand stepped forward quickly.

"Mr. Ayot, I beg that you will not do anything of the kind. I am sure the poor fellow is not mentally responsible for what he says. I have good reason to believe it, for he frightened Ruth and me this evening when—"

She paused suddenly, conscious that she had said too much, and that much against Sandy Whiskers.

"Frightened you, eh?" cried Ayot. "Then there is all the more need of disciplining him."

"But I insist," quickly replied Isabel, "that everything goes to show that he is not responsible for what he does. Don't injure him; let him go."

"My sister is right," added Ruth. "I assure Mr. Parkman that I do not regard the charge against him as worthy of serious notice. I am sure he had no idea of injuring me; now let him show his generosity by speaking for an unfortunate man who is certainly deranged."

Sandy Whiskers's hands dropped to his side, and he stood staring at the sisters in bewilderment and confusion.

Parkman was placed where he had no choice. He aspired to win Ruth Rand's love, and she had given her order.

He was equal to the emergency.

"For your sake, Miss Rand, I will overlook the charge, severe as it was upon me," he returned, with a bow. "Mr. Ayot, let the man go free."

"Or offend us!" added Isabel, steadily.

"The majority rules," Ayot returned. "I feel that I am not doing my duty, but a lady's will should be the law of man. Boys, simply escort the man beyond the grounds, and see that he don't return. I hope, Sandy Whiskers, that you won't offend again. If you do, you won't get off so easy."

He waved his hand and the miner was hustled away. He went unresistingly, his face filled with a sort of hopeless resignation. Once he put his hand to his head in a hesitating, bewildered way, and the idea of his mental derangement seemed confirmed.

He was hurried to the extremity of the grounds back of the hotel, and there the mood of his conductors suddenly changed.

One of them produced a rope.

"Here's a tree!" he exclaimed. "Now for it."

All seemed to understand what he meant; during the delay at the hall a mischievous voice had sounded in the ear of one of the servants, and this was the result:

Sandy Whiskers was more tightly held.

One end of the rope was flung over a limb.

A noose was formed about the miner's neck.

Then he suddenly aroused, as though from deep thought, and tried to put up his hands.

"Gentlemen, ain't this a bit rough?" he asked, anxiously.

"Oh! you've turned moral, eh?" sneered one of his captors.

"Why should you hurt me?"

"So you won't go in an' kick up another row."

"But I didn't touch nobody."

"Don't keer ef ye didn't; you went inter a law-abidin' place an' picked up a row; you charged a high-toned citizen with tryin' ter p'ison a gal; an' now you've got ter suffer for it. Boys, pull him up!"

The rope tightened, but Sandy Whiskers suddenly made a great effort to save himself. Those big limbs, which had seemed so loosely put together, proved to be possessed of great power.

He hurled the men away as though they had been children, and raised his hand to cast off the rope. He did not succeed. One of the more active of the enemy recovered his balance and flung his weight on Sandy Whiskers's back.

Others came to his aid.

They went at the lone miner fiercely, and though he resisted bravely, the fight went against him. Twice he nearly regained his liberty, but victory was not to be his.

He was overpowered and his hands tied to his sides.

"Now, up with him!" cried the leader.

Again the rope tightened, but before it had lifted the victim, a commanding voice arose above all other sounds:

"Hold up, thar, ye egregious critters!"

Half-unconsciously the lynchers obeyed.

"I ain't anxious to meddle with anybody's affairs," continued the voice, "but before you haul on the rope, I wanten know what that man's done ter deserve it!"

CHAPTER V.

THE TALL MOUNTAINEER.

A MAN came forward to where the light of the moon fell full upon him, and, allowing the breech of his long rifle to drop heavily to the ground, crossed his hands over the muzzle and looked steadily at the would-be lynchers.

Not one of the latter knew the new-comer. They saw a tall, bearded man in a hunting-suit, and instinctively felt that he was one whose

word and will could not be lightly disregarded, but who he was, and from whence he came, none of them knew.

After a brief pause he quietly continued:

"You don't seem ter be over-ready with yer answers, which sorter goes ag'in' ye. I consait that, as a rule, men are only tongue-tied when they're ashamed o' their work. I hope you ain't o' yours. I've only jest arrived in town, an' I'd hate like hurley ter meet atrocious insex the fu'st thing. What're ye up ter? Don't all speak at once; sorter take time ter consider. When a man is ketched in the act he ain't obleeged ter give evidence ag'in' himself—that's the law, as laid down by some great jedge whose name has slipped my mind."

The tall stranger lifted his ragged cap with one hand and thoughtfully added:

"Sometimes I think my mind ain't so strong as 'twas. I've b'en egregiously afflicted with newrol'gy, an' that's a thing that has a tendency ter upso't the mind. It's most mighty melancholy ter be upso't in the head. I knowed a man once who teached school, an' instructed the young ideas in the science o' weeds, stones, reptyles an' the like. All them sciences hev techner'kel names, but I only remember that o' weeds—that is called Botany. This was when I's young, an' bein' fairly pantin' fur knowledge I went ter the teacher."

"What kin I do fur ye?" sez he.

"You can sorter pilot me out o' the woods," sez I, meekly.

"How so?" sez he.

"I'm a pilgrim an' a stranger," sez I; "I'm in the bonds o' ignorance an' obfuscation; an' in the still watches o' the night my voice cries out fur help. I wanten be teached."

"With pleasure," sez he; "what branch do ye aspire ter grapple?"

"Weeds," sez I.

"Hey?" sez he.

"I want ter l'arn all about weeds," sez I, promptly. "I re'lize that no man kin go through life successful unless he knows erbout weeds. It's a matter o' vital importance that he should be able ter call 'em by name. He can't otherwise succeed in business."

"Sir," sez the teacher, stiffly, "the great science ter which you refer so disrespectful is called Botany, an' it's the science o' flowers, an' all growin' plants o' whatsoever sort. It's a grand science."

"To be sure," sez I. "Readin', writin', an' r'efmetic are all wal enough in their way, but they're poor, no-count things compared ter knowin' how ter call weeds by name."

"I'm afeerd you're a scoffer," sez he.

"I ain't," sez I; "I'm a hunter an' a trapper."

"Young man, do you in passin' through the fields ever crush the delikit Flora under your feet?"

"Land o' Goshen! no," sez I; "I never crushed Flora nor any other gal under my feet in my life. I wouldn't step on a feminine critter nowhow."

"Flora," sez he, "is the goddess o' flowers, an' also the name applied ter the classified list o' the vegetable products o' any given locality."

"Then you reely meant ter ask me ef I stepped on weeds, did ye?" sez I.

"Practically, yes."

"Wal," sez I, "ef the egregious ole weeds don't keep out o' my way, they be liable ter git stepped on."

"Young man," sez he, "we don't keer ter enroll ye 'mongst our pupils. Such a dullard would be scorned by Flora."

"Flora may go ter thunder!" sez I, gittin' mad right off, "an' you may go, too. I didn't come hyar ter be insulted. I'll be revenged," sez I.

"An' I was, fur I went out in the field right close ter the teacher's winder, an' I danced on all the egregious weeds I could find, until I crushed 'em all out o' shape. Hows'ever, I've forgave the botany doctor, fur he lost his mind. He got his brain so overloaded with weeds, an' their egregious long names, that he went crazy—he did, by hurley!"

The utter silence with which this alleged reminiscence was received was peculiar, but there was more than one reason why the lynchers should pause.

First, there was something about the manner of the new-comer which held them obedient to his will. His manner was very quiet and mild, with a dry, humorous vein in his every word; but under it all there was a subtle something, felt rather than seen, which told them that the man in the hunting-suit was not one to be safely defied.

Secondly, another man had come forward and taken place near the hunter. This was Rube Herndon.

He, too, stood waiting patiently, glancing first at the tall stranger and then at the lynchers; but when he looked at the latter his eyes flashed in a way which startled them.

Herndon had the name of being the most resolute man in Sassajack, and his anger was a thing to be dreaded. And they knew they had incurred it.

Thus the hunter was allowed to talk as long as he pleased. He was not unconscious of Rube's

presence. Several times he glanced at the strong young miner, but without comment.

Having finished his story he abruptly turned to Herndon.

"Mister, do you a'prove o' this hangin'?" he asked.

"Most emphatically, no!"

"Nor I. I consait that hangin' ain't good fur a man, onless the necktie is the arms o' a pooty female. I don't like ter interfere, but I consider it due ter the honor o' my fam'ly pedigree ter ask why this man must be hung."

"He must not be hung!"

Herndon spoke sharply, and striding forward, cast the rope from Sandy Whiskers's neck.

"You scoundrels!" he said, addressing the lynchers in an intense voice, "you ought to have your own necks in that noose!"

None of the lynchers found speech.

"Go!" Rube sternly added. "Get out of my sight before I lose the self-control which tells me to spare you. Go!"

He pointed to the hotel, and the crestfallen lynchers obeyed hurriedly. There was not a bold man in their party, and they were too wise to defy Herndon and the tall stranger.

The two latter and Sandy Whiskers were left together. Rube put out his hand to the man in the hunting-suit.

"I am glad to see you, Yank Yellowbird!" he said, in a clear voice.

"Land o' Goshen! I ain't met an ol' acquaintance, hev I?" the tall man asked.

"No, but I shall be most happy to be a new acquaintance. The name of Yank Yellowbird is widely known, as is his fame as an incorruptibly honest man. It was not this, however, which enabled me to recognize you; I have heard of you from a mutual friend—Bronx Hendershot."

"Do you know Bronx?" the mountaineer exclaimed.

"Yes; we often hunted together in the old days."

"Then I am right glad ter see ye, by hurley!"

"Thank you, Mr. Yellowbird—"

"Call me Yank."

"I will—or Nevermiss."

"That's a name gi'n me by the Injuns."

"They know how appropriate it is, to their sorrow."

"This rifle," replied the mountaineer, tapping the long weapon with his finger, "has done some damage ter Injuns, but never when they behaved themselves. I hope it ain't in my nature ter be cruel ter red or white."

"Your reputation would refute the charge if any one made it. My friend Bronx has told me of your kindness of heart."

"An' about my newrol'gy?"

"He mentioned it incidentally," answered Herndon, with a smile, for he knew that the case of neuralgia was one existing only in Yank's whimsical fancy.

"I'm egregiously afflicted with the newrol'gy," affirmed the mountaineer, shaking his head gravely. "I ain't got a jint but has been dislocated sev'ral times by it. I had a malev'lent attack a month ago, an' it scattered my sev'ral parts all over an acre lot. I had a serious time huntin' 'em up, an' when I did find 'em it was atrocious hard ter put the jints o' my backbone back in place properly."

"No doubt."

"Newrol'gy ain't my only a'ffliction; my left foot is a weak sister—in fact, it's a downright coward. I never got inter a fight yit but the weak sister wanted ter run. I feel bad over it, fur I come o' a nat'rally warlike fam'ly, an' it's a bad blot on the fam'ly pedigree ter hev even a foot that's a coward."

Yank made this explanation in a melancholy voice, and fell to stroking his beard energetically.

"I regret to hear that your afflictions still prevail," replied Herndon, humoring the mountaineer's fancy; "but, in any case, I am glad to see you at Sassajack. And now may I, as a friend of Bronx Hendershot, ask you to come to my shanty?"

"I'll do it willin'ly, but what o' this chap?"

He pointed to Sandy Whiskers, who stood watching them earnestly.

"We will speak of him later; just now I have other business on hand."

He glanced toward the hotel, and Sandy Whiskers suddenly started forward and grasped his arm.

CHAPTER VI.

A NOCTURNAL INTRUDER.

THE moonlight fell upon Sandy Whiskers's face, and showed it strangely pale and agitated.

"Go back to the hall!" he exclaimed, hoarsely; "go back an' take keer o' her! Don't let him walk home with her!"

Herndon looked steadily at the speaker.

"Why not?" he asked.

"He is a villain. He will—"

"What?"

"Go ter her!" Sandy Whiskers agitatedly exclaimed. "Go an' save her from him!"

Herndon turned to the mountaineer.

"Friend Yank, may I ask you to conduct this man to the tall tree you see yonder, and await my coming? I will not delay you long."

"I'm at your sarvice," Yank readily returned. "Come on, mister; we'll journey tergether, an' we won't quarrel, I consait."

"Remember!" said Sandy Whiskers, earnestly addressing Rube; and then he went obediently with his appointed guardian.

Herndon returned to the hall. The supper was finished, and the young people were preparing to go home. By previous arrangement Rube and Gladiator Gabe accompanied Ruth and Isabel; and when they had seen the girls safely at their own door, they went to the tall tree mentioned by Rube.

They found Yank Yellowbird there, but Sandy Whiskers was not visible.

"The critter left," Yank explained, in answer to Herndon's inquiring glance. "He insisted on't, an' as I didn't onn'erstand him ter be a pris'n'r, I let him go."

"You did right, though I wished to talk with him. Perhaps I will do this to-morrow—if I can find him."

"What's the diffikilty about him, anyhow?"

"His own singular actions to-night led to it; I will describe the case later. We are all uncertain how to place him. It is generally believed that he is deranged, but I place him as a sane man."

"So do I," Yank agreed. "He's sane; but he's an egregious funny critter."

"Yes; and the line between eccentricity and insanity is one so delicate that it is no wonder there is a difference of opinion. Now, friend Nevermiss I shall be pleased to conduct you to our shanty. Let me introduce to you my friend and partner, Gabriel Dix, better known as Gladiator Gabe."

"Looks as though he might ekul my grandfather, Samson, for muskle," observed Yank, as he took the young giant's hand. "Hope I see ye wal, mister. The late lamented Samson Yellowbird had a fancy fur pullin' down houses ez an amusement, but I consait you wouldn't pull down your own habitation."

"Even if I do," Gabe good-humoredly replied, "I am of the opinion that Yank Yellowbird can care for himself."

"The weak sister wouldn't let me stan' by an' be smashed; it'd run away, an' take me with it—the weak sister would."

And the mountaineer looked at the slandered left foot as though it were a creature capable of independent thought and action.

The three men went to Claim 21, and were soon in the shanty which had sheltered Rube and Gabe since they began work digging gold in Sassajack. A light was soon had, and the mountaineer was told to make himself at home.

Seen distinctly, he looked like what he was—a veteran of the West. His hunting-suit was old and, in places, badly worn—though scrupulously clean—and each garment was so much too large for his lean, bony form that it presented an odd appearance. His weapons, too, were of anything but the latest style in such things, and had plainly seen long service; but they were as serviceable as when fresh from the maker's hands.

His hair was neither long nor short, but seemed in need of trimming. Its color was flaxen, and his sparse, erratic beard presented half a dozen hues bordering on the same color. His nose was large and prominent; his eyes small and mild; and his cheekbones seemed higher than the average.

Even his best friend would be obliged to admit that Yank Yellowbird was not a handsome man but it was a brave, frank, manly, honest face; a mild, genial, humorous face; and a face which would favorably appeal alike to the instinct of the child and the reason of the maturer age.

Reputation said that the man was a lamb in peace and a lion in war. Always anxious to avoid quarrels, he was ready at all times to help the weak and persecuted, and to defend the right.

And when the battle-fire flamed within him, those mild gray eyes could grow angry and flashing, and the whimsical mouth become stern and aggressive.

There were few men whom Rube Herndon would have more cordially welcomed, and he tried to show this in every way.

Conversation turned upon Sandy Whiskers and his strange actions, and Rube told the whole story. Then followed the natural inquiry: Was the lone miner insane?

Ruth and Isabel had been firmly of the opinion that such was the case; they could not doubt it. He was a stranger to them; there was no reason why he should speak to or help them; and he had not been able to explain his strange conduct.

Herndon took an opposite view. He had observed the man closely and studied him well. He decided against the insanity theory, but this left him in a position even worse.

He could in no way account for Sandy Whiskers's actions.

"You, too, say that you think him sane," he continued, addressing Yank.

"To be sure."

"Upon what do you base your views?" asked Gladiator Gabe.

"Upon my eyes."

"And observations?"

"To be sure. I consait I kin usually tell a maniac from one that ain't."

"Sandy Whiskers is not a maniac. If off in the upper story, he is merely deranged. But how do you account for his conduct toward the young ladies?"

"You say he ain't 'quainted with 'em?"

"Not in the least degree."

"No reason fur his int'rest?"

"None whatever."

"Has he a spite ag'in' Parkman?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"An' he's a harmless sort o' a critter?"

"Yes."

"Or has been so considered," interpolated Rube.

"Do ye suspect he ain't?" asked Yank.

"I think he is harmless."

"What is Parkman's reputation?"

Gabe and Rube exchanged glances.

"He is generally well regarded," Gabe then replied.

"You're keepin' somethin' back," said Yank, his gray eyes suddenly twinkling. "What is it?"

"Knowing your good judgment as I do, I will tell you all," Rube returned. "My friend, Gabe, and I are interested in the Rand sisters. So is Parkman—in one of them. So is his friend, Jackingham, in the other. In plain words, we are rivals; Gabe and I against those two men. Now, we believe them to be rascals, but is our judgment good, or does it spring from our natural antipathy to them?"

"You've opened a big subject," Yank affirmed, with a serious double nod of his shaggy head. "Thar ain't no one subject in the world that's bigger than love, when ye take it with all its ramblefications."

"We won't dispute you."

"I knowed one case whar the ramblefications was egregious," admitted the mountaineer. "Twas a case o' my own. I fell in love, an' as I was jest up from bed arter a 'fact o' some sort of malev'lent fever—trip-us fever, I b'lieve 'twas, an' I know it come egregious nigh trip-pin' me up—an' my system wa'n't in no proper condition ter stand a second disease; but I fell in love jest the same."

"The complaint pulled me down in flesh amazin', an' I jest about lost all int'rest in life. The wu'st on't was the obick o' my passion didn't help me an artom. In fact, I consait it did her good, fer she run up in weight until she got a persition as female giant in a circus. You may not b'lieve it, but I 'tended ev'ry performance o' that circus fur three months, an' only stopped when my money gi'n out. I finally recovered, but my s'perience leads me ter b'lieve that the ramblefications o' love are suthin' dang'rous."

Finishing his digression, Yank followed it with the abrupt declaration:

"I'm o' the opinion that thar may be method in Sandy's conduct."

"How so?" Herndon asked.

"Now you hev me."

"I don't clearly understand."

"Nor I, by hurley! Sandy seems ter be a riddle. I ain't goin' ter resk the honor o' my family pedigree by givin' a rash verdict, but I'll look inter this ef you wish. I've goin' ter stay in Sassajack fur awhile, an' I'll sorter an'lyze Sandy an', likewise, Parkman an' Jackingham."

Both the miners expressed themselves pleased with this arrangement.

They suspected that the end of the mystery was not yet reached, and, in any case, it would be a good thing to have such a man as Yank Yellowbird as their friend.

He was invited to make their shanty his home for a time, and he promptly accepted. He had been observing both Gabe and Rube closely, and, having an unusual faculty for ready character, he was pleased to have matters as arranged.

The night was rapidly wearing on when the trio lay down to get such sleep as they could.

Claim 21 was dark and silent.

For an hour the three men slept quietly, but it was not ordained that the night should pass without another exciting event.

Yank Yellowbird was a light sleeper. Gold-digging he knew nothing about, except from observation, but as hunter, trapper and scout he had passed long years, had met the tricks and hostile wiles of red-men and white with counter-moves, and from the habit of lying down at night when he knew not how soon a life-seeking foe might be upon him, had learned to be alert even in his hours of slumber.

He awoke now with a feeling that something was wrong. His mind was as clear as ever, and his broad right hand at once closed upon the long rifle which lay by his side.

He listened attentively.

Not a sound was to be heard save the breathing of his two companions.

To many minds the state of affairs would have been reassuring; but instinct, if not reason, told the wanderer of the mountains and prairies that appearances were deceptive.

Without another movement he waited.

A full minute passed. Then a stealthy, rustling sound reached his ears. He had heard it.

before—heard it when deadly enemies were creeping toward his lonely camp in the wilds. He knew how to account for it now. An intruder was in the shanty!

CHAPTER VII.

MYSTERIOUS AGITATION.

NEVERMISS quietly concentrated his attention on the point where the unknown was moving, while he considered his own course.

Had he been in his own hut he would not have been at a loss, but he was only a guest, and his hosts were almost entire strangers to him. There was a bare possibility, too, that he had misjudged the state of affairs; the moving creature might not be what Yank thought he was—an enemy.

So the mountaineer lay still and waited.

The creeping sound soon ceased, but it was followed by a fumbling, as though the intruder was handling some of the things in the shanty.

Yank's decision was then quickly made, and he spoke in a low, clear voice:

"I say, mister, ef ye don't see what ye want, ask for it!"

There was a startled movement; then utter silence.

"Keep still a bit," the veteran continued, "an' I'll hev a light."

Something in these words seemed to alarm the unknown anew, and Yank heard him moving quickly but cautiously toward the door. This decided Yank, who leaped to his feet, but his rifle hit a tin dish that was hanging on the wall and it fell with a clatter. Then the unknown flashed out of the shanty.

Yank paused at the door. He could see the man bounding away at full speed, and the impulse was strong to pursue. He resisted it and turned to meet Rube and Gabe, who were upon their feet, weapons in hand. The noise had aroused them.

"What is wrong here?" demanded the voice of Herndon, sharply but coolly.

"You've had comp'ny," quoth Nevermiss.

"Company!"

"Yes."

"What do you mean, Yank?"

"I was waked up," tersely replied the mountaineer, "by the creepin' o' a man in hyar. I spoke an' asked who he was, an' the atrocious in-sex galloped away like a scar't wolf."

"Which way did he go?"

"Yender."

Yank pointed to the high western ridge of the Golden Moon, which lay like a stepping-stone to the towering peaks of the upper range beyond.

"Have you any idea who it was?"

"Not an artom."

By this time Gladiator Gabe had obtained a light, and the three men became more clearly visible to each other.

"Now wait a bit," Yank added. "Afore we tread the 'arth all up, let me look fur the varmint's trail. We may be able ter bring him ter grief. I'd like to—I would, by hurley!—fur it's a mean reptyle that'll sneak inter a man's house at dead o' night, an' distarb him in the bosom o' his fam'ly."

The mountaineer received the light, but paused to address Herndon, which he did with the index finger of his left hand waving slowly and seriously.

"A distant relative o' mine, named Gulliver Yellowbird, once traveled in a country called Lilypod, though whar that is I don't rec'leck; an' he found a race o' men so stunted in size that they wa'n't so big as a ten-year-old boy afore breakfast. The Lilypodians was sassy ter my cousin Gulliver, an' he thrashed some on 'em like hurley; but one night, when he's asleep, they stole inter his wigwam an' tied him up with buckskin thongs, arter which they sold him ter the Malay pirates, an' he sarved five year in the kerosene 'ile regions o' Siberia. Sence then it's a trait o' the Yellowbird pedigree ter despise sneaks, an' ef I kin ketch this chap, I will. He deserves it—he does, by hurley!"

The speaker smote his thigh in mild indignation, and then proceeded with the search.

He looked the interior of the shanty over, and followed the course taken by the runaway a few rods.

Gabe and Rube watched his face as he looked, but it was as unreadable as a Sphinx. He returned to the shanty without a word of comment; then he shook his head slowly.

"No use," he admitted. "Whoever the varmint was, he was sharp; an' he come hyar in his stockin's. No boots, no moccasins, no bare feet. He wore stockin's, an' I consait that ain't an easy trail ter foller. I'm obleeged ter admit that I can't place him."

"He came here to rob us," Gabe quietly remarked.

"Think so?"

"Yes."

"We collected some of our gold-dust yesterday," added Herndon, "and it is probable that he thought it concealed in the shanty. He made a grand mistake; it is not here."

"You b'lieve, then, that he was only a robber?"

"Such is my theory, and Gabe has said the same. Do you think otherwise?"

"No; I consait not."

"You have some idea in mind."

"The atrocious in-sex was in dead earnest."

"What do you mean?"

"When he come in hyar he kerried a knife in his hand. He crept on his hands an' knees, an' you kin see whar the handle o' the knife te'ched the ground at the same time his right hand did. See them little hollers in the 'arth?"

"Yes."

"Them was made by a knife-handle. Now, a thief who carries a knife ready fur use won't hesitate ter use it when nec'sary. This ain't a singular case, but, b'ar in mind that your thief is an ugly customer, an' keep an eye out fur him in futur."

"If I catch him, I shall do my best to break his head," Rube coolly replied. "Men of his stripe deserve no mercy; and they will get but little in Sassajack. We have tried to keep the place clear of lawlessness, and the attempt will be continued."

"To be sure. Keep the 'tarnal snakes out. One o' my ancestors—Adam Yellowbird, o' Eden Garden—he married Eva Smith—made an egregious blunder by 'lowin' priv'liges ter snakes, an' they jest played havoc with his form an' domestic relations. Keep the snakes out o' Sassajack, by all means."

The three men returned to their blankets. Gabe had suggested that he watch the night out, but Nevermiss overruled him.

The veteran spread his blanket by the door, and lay down as calmly as though no danger could menace him.

He had slept boldly when the most wily of all his foes, the Indians, had been on his track, and he did not fear a skulking thief.

The remainder of the night passed quietly.

They were early astir, and breakfast was prepared and eaten. Then Yank sat down to clean his rifle, and Gabe motioned to Rube to go outside the shanty. They went. The sun had arisen, and many of the miners were at work, but on Claim 22, as on their own, no stroke of the pick had been made as yet.

Parkman and Jackingham were making up their loss of sleep.

"Not very industrious fellows," observed Rube, looking toward the next shanty.

"No."

"They will never get rich by gold-digging."

"No."

"I may be blinded by jealousy, but I consider them first-class rascals. I wish Ruth and Isabel thought so."

Gladiator Gabe smiled.

"Are you afraid of them, as rivals?" he asked.

Herndon shrugged his shoulders.

"I should be a bold man to say that I am not," he answered. "Ruth's manner gives me hope, but who can say what turn the human fancy will take? Women are great advocates of high qualities in general, but when it comes to individual cases, the strongest advocate is liable to marry a drunkard, or thief, with her eyes wide open. Don't take this as a slur upon Ruth; I regard her as the best of her sex, but I do not forget that we are all human. There! overlook my harangue; it would have audience."

"I am not afraid that Jackingham will rob me of Isabel," said Gabe, with quiet confidence. Rube looked at him closely.

"Have you put the matter to the test?"

"Yes."

"And you have not told me until now?"

"It was only last night, Rube. I should have told you then, but honest Yank was with us."

"And Isabel answered favorably?"

"Yes."

Herndon put out his hand, and their palms crossed in an earnest clasp.

"I congratulate you with my whole heart, Gabe," was the deep-toned assurance. "Isabel is a fine girl, and you—well, you are worthy of any woman. I hope your future will be without one cloud, and always as calm and peaceful as your past."

Gabe started perceptibly.

"My past!" he echoed.

"So I said."

"What do you know of my past?"

"If we go beyond the day when we met—practically nothing."

Herndon noticed a peculiar agitation in his friend's manner, and decided to let the matter rest where it was. The young giant was silent for a moment, his gaze bent upon the ground and his face perceptibly clouded; then he suddenly looked up.

"We will let the past rest," he said, quietly.

"It would be an extraordinary man who could say there was nothing in his past he would be glad to have erased from his memory. I look only to the future, now, and I am happy—very happy!"

"My best wishes are yours, Gabe, though I fear that I shall soon lose my partner. This camp would be a lonely place without 'Samson of Sassajack,' as some of them call you. Have you settled a date?"

Gabe understood what the question meant.

"No," he replied. "I spoke in favor of an early marriage, and Isabel did not combat the idea. Just when it will be I can't say. Like

you, Rube, I shall be sorry to see our partnership end, but I do not forget Ruth Rand."

"Nor I," Herndon dryly replied.

"Dare your fate there, old partner, and be as happy as I am. Learn what Paradise means; I learned when Isabel made her answer!"

Gabe's face was the personification of happiness, but before more could be said Yank Yellowbird came out of the shanty and approached them.

"Hope I don't intrude," he observed, "but I hev a trifie ter call yer attention to, hyar. I've found an article in the hut which may be your'n, an' then, ag'in, it may be the prop'ty o' last night's prowler."

He extended his hand and gave to Gladiator Gabe, who was nearest to him—a plain gold ring.

Gabe received it indifferently.

"Not mine," he said.

"Nor mine," Rube added.

"Then," decided Yank, "the egregious thief must 'a' dropped it when he—"

The veteran ceased speaking; a startled exclamation had fallen from Gabe's lips. Both Yank and Rube looked at him in wonder. The young giant had grown very pale, and he was staring wildly at the ring.

"Why, what's the trouble?" Herndon asked.

Gabe's lips unclosed. He seemed to make a strong effort to speak, but no words passed his ashen lips; and the hand which held the ring shook like a wind-swept leaf.

Suddenly a husky cry broke from his lips, and with long steps he hurried away from them and disappeared within the shanty.

CHAPTER VIII.

GLADIATOR GABE'S SECRET.

RUBE and Yank looked at each other surprised. That of the latter was of a mild type, but Herndon was superlatively astonished. Shifting his gaze once more, he stared blankly at the shanty door. Gladiator Gabe was not visible.

Deeply perplexed, he made another change, and questioned Yank with both eyes and lips.

"What sent him off so suddenly?"

"I ain't an idee," Nevermiss confessed, with a puzzled air.

"Was there anything peculiar about that ring?"

"I didn't see as thar was."

"I never knew Gabe to have a ring of any sort—"

"He couldn't get that one onto his little finger."

"I judge not, though I saw it only indistinctly. Where did you find it?"

"On the ground in the shanty. Somebody'd stepped on it, an' ground it inter the soft 'arth, which was why we didn't see it afore."

"Beyond doubt it was lost by the intruder you frightened away last night, but why should it agitate Gabe so?"

"I don't know no reason."

Yank was speaking guardedly. It occurred to him that there was probably good reason why Gabe should be agitated, and as the young men were friends, and he was almost an utter stranger to both, he was reluctant to give expression to many views when he could do no good.

Rube, too, began to think more clearly. He had been greatly surprised at first, but his strong mind resumed its sway. He, too, remembered how they were placed; he remembered that while Gabriel Dix was his friend, Yank Yellowbird, barring a highly favorable opinion from a mutual friend, was unknown to him.

"I will go to him presently," he said, after a pause.

"To be sure. As for me, I'll bid ye farewell fur a season an' go an' survey the land 'round Sassajack. When I settle in a town I like ter know its ins an' outs, its secret places an' g'neral peculiarities. Comes handy sometimes."

"True," Rube absently admitted.

"I'm bound fur them upper peaks, an' I consait it'll be a pleasant trip. I spend more'n half my time p'rambulatin' when the egregious new-rol'gy ain't rendin' my system too bad. Libin' fur pedestrickism was early instilled inter me. My mother did it, an' she used a stick. Ye see I was goin' ter school, but me an' the teacher couldn't agree on some obtuse p'int in the multiplication table, an' we had a stirrin' argument. He got the best on't, but he used a ruler. Next mornin' my mother sez:

"It's time ter go to school," sez she.

"I ain't goin'," sez I.

"You ain't? Why not?" sez she.

"I'm done with school," sez I.

"Young man," sez she, "put on yer cap"—no, I b'lieve I wore a hat that season; yes, I know I did—"an' gallop ter school like a colt."

"I can't gallop," sez I, "fur the teacher's argument has made my legs sore; an' as fur goin' ter school ter an' igenomous who sez five times seven don't make twenty-eight, I won't!"

"Wayward youth," sez she, sadly, "your stubborn, onrejuvenated speerit shocks me. I will see ef you are open ter reason, hows'ever," sez she.

"With that she took down a three-foot birch stick which was kep' on the shelf fur my special amusement, an' preceded ter reason with me.

Thar was a period o' time durin' which I never once thought o' the multiplication-table, an' when the skirmish was over the force o' her arguments was plain ter me, an' the birch stick had been all wore up on my trowsers.

"I agreed that the teacher was most likely c'reck about the p'int in ma'fematics, an' then my mother escorted me ter school with my left ear laid affectionately in the holler o' her hand. I had ter agree with the teacher that five times seven made forty-three, but that arternoon I spil't a pint bottle o' ink on his big dectionary, an' I consaited he wa'n't a great 'eal ahead, ef the calves o' my legs *did* ache atrociously."

Yank abruptly lifted his rifle to his shoulder.

"Wal, I'm off," he added.

"I expect you back by noon," returned Rube. "I'll come; I ain't goin' ter live on ye, but you may look fur me at noon, anyhow."

The mountaineer walked away. Herndon was observing enough to realize that his departure was due wholly to delicacy; Yank did not want to intrude upon Gabe Dix, and he took the easiest way of settling the matter.

Rube moved toward the shanty, filled with wonder in regard to his partner.

Passing inside he saw Gabe seated on a stool, staring at the ring. His expression was one of profound dejection, but he looked up as Rube entered and tried to throw the shadow from his mind.

"Back again?" he questioned.

"Yes. Our guest has gone for a walk, and will not return until noon."

It was a delicate way of stating that they were free from interruption. Rube said no more, but sat down and began to busy himself with some trifle. Gabe hesitated for a moment, and then slowly asked:

"Did Yank seem very much puzzled by my actions?"

"I don't know what was in the mountaineer's mind, but he delicately changed the subject, told a story, and then went away. He showed great consideration."

"He is a fine man."

"One out of a thousand. He has the fine sensibilities of a woman, united with the courage of a lion. He talks about his left foot, alleging that it is a coward, but nobody is braver than he. He claims to be badly afflicted with neuralgia, but this is only his whimsical fancy. He has a contented, considerate nature, and in times of peace he is full of mild conceits, but all reports go to show that when he opposes evil men, in defense of the worthy and persecuted, he is a lion and the terror of his enemies."

Herndon made the tribute with sincerity, but his mind was upon Gladiator Gabe. He saw that his partner was still agitated and troubled, and while he would not urge confidence, he was anxious to receive it—for Gabe's sake.

He was not kept wholly in suspense. The giant spoke abruptly:

"I suppose you wonder at my conduct?"

"Well—yes, naturally."

"Of course I showed agitation?"

"Yes."

"I was shaken as by a whirlwind."

"I hope it is no serious trouble," Herndon said, sympathetically.

"Do you see this ring?"

"Yes."

"It did all the damage."

Gabriel Dix gazed somberly at the plain circlet of gold, and then added in a deep voice:

"A person once said to me, 'When I am dead, my ghost will bring this ring to you?'"

The words—the pledge—sounded absurd to a mind as practical as Herndon's, but he had only to look at Gabe's pale, gloomy face to feel sure that it was no trifling matter, when fully understood.

"Half an hour ago," pursued the young Samson, "I told you that I was a happy man. Now I am miserable—wretched!"

"Is it as serious as that?"

"Yes."

"I am sorry to hear it."

Rube's voice and manner were as sympathetic as his words, but he still refrained from urging Gabe to make a confession he possibly did not wish to make.

"Moreover," continued Dix, after a pause, "I told you half an hour ago that my past was unknown to you. This ring, Rube, connects me with the past. It revives old memories, and they turn my blood to fever heat and seethe my brain. As though brought up by a conjurer's art, I see the past arrayed before me. Scenes that were pleasant, but all too soon doomed to fade; scenes of doubt, distrust, vain hope and agony; scenes that crushed my heart and made me almost mad—all rise before me. I came here to forget them; this ring has made them as vivid as ever."

"May you not be mistaken as to the ring? Possibly a resemblance has deceived you."

"There is an inscription inside."

"How do you account for its presence here?"

"The unknown intruder came on purpose to leave it!"

"If that is so, why was it left on the ground?"

"I don't know. All I do know is that a certain person declared that, when death had

come I should have the ring back. It has come!"

"From which, you infer that the person is dead—"

"Dead long ago—I think."

The pause marked a panoramic change of Gabe's face. Doubt, uncertainty, fear and mental agony were in turn depicted on his face. He abruptly arose and began walking the narrow limits of the shanty. Rube watched him with anxious solicitude. Suddenly Gabe paused before him.

"Old friend, do me one favor."

"A dozen, gladly."

"Leave me alone here until noon—and don't be offended because I ask it."

"Offended! I should be a bear to take offense. You are right, Gabe, and I will leave you alone with yourself and my sympathy."

The young giant wrung his friend's hand.

"Heaven bless you, Rube!—you are as true as steel. One word before you go. I was to—to visit—Isabel—this evening. I may want you to take my excuses—sickness—business—anything. Now go, old friend, go!"

He showed Herndon out of the shanty with haste which was almost violent, and then, turning back, flung himself upon his blanket and buried his face in his hands.

What did it all mean?

CHAPTER IX.

"A CONVENTION OF ONNAT'RAIS!"

YANK YELLOWBIRD walked away from the shanty with a steady step and observant gaze. To him there was none of the strangeness which most persons feel upon entering a town new to them; all places were home to Nevermiss.

For twenty years he had known no other than where he chanced to be when night overtook him, and his roving feet had pressed the soil of every State and Territory west of the Mississippi River. As a rule, his stay in any town which he visited was brief; he preferred the wilder parts of the great West, where few of his fellow-beings were to be seen.

The mountains and prairies were to him the most pleasant of scenes, and the creations of Nature the best of companions. Accompanied only by his horse, he often passed weeks at a time in some wild locality without seeing a human face. If there had been fear of monotony, it was broken by brushes with belligerent wild animals, and experiences with hostile men of various colors. Often his night-camp was descended upon by Indians, but when they arrived he was gone.

Possessing a remarkable degree of perspicacity and instinct, the tall mountaineer escaped unharmed from each trap set for him.

On the present occasion he passed through the small village of Sassajack, and then wandered along up Golden Moon Valley to the rougher country north of the collection of buildings.

He found much to interest him there, for the scenery was wild and picturesque, and he went on with a full sense of gratitude to the Power that had placed such things before his eyes.

Half an hour passed in aimless wandering, and then, in a gulch, he came unexpectedly upon a shanty. A pick stood by the door, and not far away were signs that mining had been going on, but no work was in progress.

A single man sat by the door, and Yank recognized him at a glance. It was Sandy Whiskers.

The mountaineer meditated for a moment. He had not been seen, and there was time to retreat; but after a little thought he concluded that he did not want to retreat. He walked toward the shanty.

Sandy Whiskers soon saw him, but did not change his position as Yank came up.

"How d'e do?" quoth the veteran, genially.

"Good-mornin', sir," Sandy Whiskers respectfully returned.

"Takin' a rest?"

The miner glanced toward his pick.

"Yes, sir."

"Your name, I b'lieve, is Sandy Whiskers?"

"So they call me, sir."

"Mine is Yank Yellowbird. Good 'eal alike, our names be, by hurley! You don't hev the jumpin' newrol'gy, do ye?"

"No," replied the miner, seriously. "Do you?"

"The wu'st way. Only a short time ago it give my right leg an egregious twist when I's asleep, an' off my guard, an' it broke the atrocious bone short off."

"Dear me!" murmured Sandy Whiskers, in bewilderment, "that was right strange. It must 'a' laid you up a long time."

"Not a tall," placidly returned Yank. "'Twas all right the next mornin'. The bones o' the Yellowbirds knit easy. I had a gran'father who was run over by a distress train—which was what ye may call a distressin' circumstance—an' when they c'lected the pieces on him in a basket, ter kerry them ter the morgue, they jumped at each other like ravenin' wolves, hitched right tergether, an' my gran'father riz up a wal man."

Sandy Whiskers's simple mind failed to see

the joke. His bewilderment increased, and he looked at his companion in dumfounded wonder.

"That was amazin'!" he muttered.

"Not much, it wa'n't. Guess you don't know much about the Yellowbird fam'ly. We're a peccoliar lot. Thar ain't a fam'ly in this region kin trace their pedigree back furdur than we kin. It goes ter Adam Yellowbird, who married Eve Smith an' lived at Eden City; an' we should trace it furdur ef Adam had kep' a fam'ly cronography. My great-gran'father's uncle advertised fur all who knowed Adam's father's fu'st name ter send in items, but though replies came in freely, nobody jestly remembered what it was. I hed an idee that it may hev b'en Ichabod, fur thar was lots o' Ichabods in our fam'ly, but the Yellowbirds never put on record what they guess at. The motto o' Napoleon Yellowbird was: 'Keep the pedigree free from anarchyism!' an' we aim ter do it."

This was too much even for Sandy Whiskers's simple, unsuspecting nature, and he looked at Yank with doubt and surprise, mingled with reproach.

Before he could answer, the mountaineer's keen bearing served him in good use; he turned quickly, and saw two men approaching. One was Steelblade, the Knife-Thrower; the other was a burly fellow in a red shirt, which was not much redder than its wearer's broad, gross face.

Steelblade made a servile bow.

"Give you good-day, masters!" he humbly said.

"You may be right, mister," Yank promptly replied, "but I consait you're mistaken. Ef you give us the day, how'd you do it? Who sot you up ter make weather, anyhow?"

A shade of curtness in the veteran's voice indicated that he was not pleased with the new arrivals.

"You are facetious, master," observed Steelblade, with a low bow.

"Not much, I ain't; an' I don't thank ye fur sayin' so. I dunno what in hurley ye mean, but no Yellowbird would be so mean as that. It don't run in the blood; our pedigree is clean."

"I come o' a right smart fam'ly myself," put in the red-faced stranger. "We are a compound, corrosive mixtur o' grizzly b'ar, catamount, an' rattlesnake, an' we're sure death when we let ourselves loose. My name is Tecumseh Tubbs, an' I'm right from Arkansaw, whar they raise men."

"With a rope?" questioned Yank, calmly stroking his sparse beard.

"Hey?" cried Tubbs, scowling fiercely.

"I asked ef they raised the man with a rope."

"That's an insult, an' you stan' a right smart chance o' gittin' thrashed; but as I hammered four men all ter pieces yesterday, I'll pass it over."

"Bleeged ter you, by hurley! I'd hate ter be thrashed by sech an insignificant chap as you."

"Hey?" cried the man from Arkansaw, in a ferocious tone; but Steelblade's voice arose as soft as the purr of a big cat:

"You will have your jokes, masters, and I must say you are both witty. Ha! ha! A merry gathering, Master Whiskers."

"A convention o' onnat'rais, I should say," grimly amended Nevermiss.

"Don't let us hev any trouble, gentlemen," put in Sandy Whiskers, almost imploringly.

"Not an artom," Yank replied. "None o' the Yellowbirds ever seek trouble; it comes ter most on 'em unsought, though I did hev a step-aunt on my mother's side who spent nearly all her time runnin' arter it. It's a solemn fact," deposed the mountaineer, shaking his long forefinger at Sandy Whiskers, "that she wore her feet off cl'ar ter her knees chasin' trouble."

"I had an uncle," declared Tecumseh Tubbs, "who killed three thousand grizzly b'ars in one week, an' he did it all with a knife. 'Twas as big as that air toy, with sixteen inches more o' steel."

He pointed to the weapon in Steelblade's belt.

"This is 'Bright Eyes,' masters," said Steelblade, drawing the knife. "Observe her twinkle!"

He waved the glittering blade in the sunlight until the air seemed full of darting gleams; then hurled it high in air and, as it descended, turning end over end, caught it deftly by the handle.

Continuing his movements rapidly, he drew an ordinary playing card from his pocket and flung it into the air between him and the shanty. The card descended, and then "Bright Eyes" suddenly left his hand. There was a dull sound, and then the card was seen pinned to the wall of the shanty, impaled through the middle by the blade of the quivering knife.

"A neat trick, by hurley!" Yank admitted, with a nod.

Steelblade withdrew the knife.

"Great is 'Bright Eyes,' the queen of my heart!" he murmured, mellowly. "She is my love, my life, masters. Look! I kiss her!"

He pressed his lips to the blade, and then returned "Bright Eyes" to his belt.

Yank Yellowbird was conscious of a peculiar tingling of his nerves. Stout-hearted as he was, there was something so weird, unnatural and

cat-like about Steelblade and his motions that he could not but think of things supernatural.

Sandy Whiskers had seen all this with open-mouthed amazement. A faint smile appeared upon Steelblade's swarthy face as he noticed the lone miner.

"Come, Master Whiskers," he added, "it is your turn next. Show your weapons."

"I don't carry none," was the slow reply.

"You don't?"

"No."

"How do you care for yourself in this wild country, good master?"

"Thar is One who watches over us all," reverently replied the miner. "I trust Him, while as fur my feller men, Heaven grant that I never do one on 'em harm!"

"Not to save your own life, master?"

"My patience may yit be taxed beyond the limit o' control," was the slow reply; "but I hope I may never need ter harm anybody."

"You're a caution ter observe!" declared Tecumseh Tubbs. "I ain't took your way. I'm a raw-beef eater, an' a terror in boots. I come o' a fam'ly half grizzly b'ar, half catamount an' half rattlesnake. I'm a fighter with the bark on, an' hoofs charged with electricity. Speakin' on that subject, your legs would make good telegraph poles, old man, ef you'd take off them meal-bags!"

He had pointed to Yank's lower extremities, and was leering offensively at the mountaineer.

"My legs," responded Yank, showing just a shade of annoyance, "are jest as natur' made 'em."

"I don't b'lieve it. Natur' never turned out two broomsticks 'bout any meat on 'em, an' called 'em legs. I'm blowed ef she did!"

"Natur' did her best," Nevermiss steadily replied, "an' 'tain't her fault ef I tramp around so egregiously that flesh don't cumulate fast. What thar is on me is mostly bone, muskle an' flesh, though; I don't carry a barrel o' whisky in my tissues, an' put a sign in my face ter brag on't, like some onnat'als I know."

Tubbs was impervious to the retort, and plainly bent on mischief.

"Don't let us wander from the subject," he persisted. "We was speakin' o' them legs o' yours. I wonder how they hold ye up, by thunder! Thought you's a man on stilts, at fust. Great myst'ry about them legs, an' with yer leave I'll 'zamine them clost'er!"

A malicious grin had overspread his face, and at the last word he suddenly stooped and tried to seize Yank by the ankles, his object being to jerk the veteran's feet out from under him.

Just how it happened the warlike man from Arkansas never knew, but his forward movement was met by one more rapid—it was marvelously quick—and he was whirled about like a top. Another movement and one of the slandered legs was playing back and forth, and Yank's generously-formed foot was bestowing a series of kicks upon Mr. Tubbs which made him roar with pain and wrath. Desperately he tried to break away, but the tall mountaineer's grip was one of steel; he held to the man who had first insulted, and then made an unsuccessful attack upon him.

And his foot did its work with machine-like regularity.

Suddenly it dropped to the ground, and then Tecumseh Tubbs shot forward, impelled by Yank's strong arms, struck upon one shoulder, turned an involuntary somerset, and then lay in a disordered heap by the shanty.

He slowly rose to a sitting position.

Yank was leaning upon his long rifle, as calm and unconcerned as though nothing had occurred. Tubbs blinked like an owl in daylight, and then slowly spoke.

"Quite a sarcumstance!" he observed.

"Nothin' ter speak on," Yank mildly replied.

"Due ter a comet?"

"Due ter my legs!" quoth Nevermiss, quietly.

"I reckon you are right. Your legs show up wal when put to it, don't they? Now I look at 'em ag'in, I see p'int's in 'em I didn't see afore. You presented 'em ter my notice, an' I felt yer logic—an' yer legs. Now, I thought I war a fightin' man, an' I've found out that I ain't; but one thing I'm sure on. I ain't a fool. Stranger, I apol'gize ter you an' yer legs!"

And Mr. Tubbs rose to his feet, as cheerful as ever.

CHAPTER X.

THE LONE MINER.

THE man from Arkansas caressed his injured person gingerly.

"I reckon it'll be tortur' ter move fur a week, but the honor o' yer legs is vindictivated. When I git a spasm it'll remind me that all the fightin' blood ain't confined ter my State. You raise some beef out this way, I reckon. Stranger, you're a gem, an' I'm proud o' bein' licked by you. Hope ye don't bear malice?"

"I consait not," Yank readily replied.

"Nor me. When we meet, let it be as friends; I'll walk up ter you, free an' hearty, ef I ain't too sore ter walk. Steelblade, come on; I'm ready ter adjourn."

Nodding good-humoredly to Yank and Sandy Whiskers, Tubbs moved away. Steelblade

opened his lips to speak, changed his mind, and went in silence.

Nevermiss looked after them thoughtfully, and was only aroused when the miner spoke.

"What do you think o' them?" he asked.

"I consait their room is better than their comp'ny," the mountaineer replied.

"The man Steelblade frightens me. I may wrong him, but—"

"You don't; not an atom. I consait I ain't seen a bigger rascal fur some time, an' his ways ain't pleasant. The atrocious insex is full o' mischief as the Old Nick, hisself. Tubbs ain't so bad, but I'd as soon trust a grizzly as him."

"You saw Steelblade's knife?"

"To be sure."

"He frightened me with that!" and the miner shivered.

"A bad varmint, I admit, but don't ye get skeered. You're as big as him."

"I ain't a fightin' man."

"Larn ter be one afore night!"

Sandy Whiskers shook his head.

"Don't tempt me ter harm any man."

"Not much—I ain't doin' it; but hev ye forgot thar was a rope 'round yer neck last night?"

"Don't speak on it. An' yit—wait, wait; I owe thanks ter you, an' I thank ye hearty."

"That's all right; I'd save a wounded buffler from wolves, so I'd be egregious mean ter let a human bein' suffer ondeserved. The Yellowbirds would meet in a solemn conc'ave an' cast mo out o' the bosom o' the fam'ly—they would, by hurley! But, mister, you puzzled folks tremendous last night."

Sandy Whiskers looked confused.

"I did?"

"Yes."

Yank looked inquiringly at his companion, but no explanation was vouchsafed.

"Do you know the Rand gals?" pursued the mountaineer, after a pause.

"No."

"Then why did ye do as ye did?"

Sandy Whiskers cast a frightened look at the questioner and hesitated for a reply.

"I didn't do no harm, did I?" he finally asked.

"Wal, that's 'cordin' as you look at it," Yank drily replied. "You didn't hurt nobody phys'cally, but you raised a most egregious commotion, an' come nigh gittin' yer queatus with a rope. *Qui-eat-us*," the veteran explained, with careful emphasis, "means a full stop ter 'arthly tribulations an' distresses."

"I meant wal," humbly protested the miner.

"Wal, 'tain't fur me ter jedge ye, Sandy; an' I only speak as a frien', fur you seem ter me a likely, harmless sort o' chap as fur as intent goes; but let me say ter you privately that you may not come out as wal ef ye try it ag'in."

"I prevented a murder!" persisted Sandy Whiskers, with more energy.

"Of the gal, by Parkman?"

"Yes."

"I don't know either on 'em, an' I can't say. I s'pose you hev yer reasons. Why should he p'izon her?"

The miner hesitated and looked anywhere except at Yank Yellowbird. His expression was troubled, and his big fingers worked uneasily upon his knees.

"Is the gal very much angry?" he asked, more humbly than ever.

"I can't say, fur I ain't seen her."

"I meant wal."

"So you said afore. Now, this ain't my affair, an' I don't want ter worry ye, an' I only speak fur your good; but ef you'd speak right out, you'd settle the hull egregious case—perhaps. Why should Parkman want ter p'izon the little gal?"

Sandy Whiskers fairly trembled.

"Don't ask me!" he answered, like one in pain.

"I won't," Yank cheerfully replied. "I didn't come hyar ter harass ye, an' I won't do it—I won't, by hurley! Rouse up, Sandy, an' face the music. Thar is nothin' like havin' a contented heart. I hev, an' all the Yellowbirds hev; it's a peccoliarly o' our pedigree. I had a third cousin—Abijah Yellowbird, was his name—who put on the matrimonial halter with a female widow. She was badly widowed, too, fur she had outlived three previous husbands."

"Member distinctly how Abijah an' me went walkin' the night afore the event. He was as sad as a fish outer water, an' his tears flowed copious, but the widow had b'en beseechin' on him fur sev'ral months, an' had run him down as wolves will a wounded buffler. He paused by the graveyard, an' p'int'n' his finger, sez he:

"'Thar is my futur' home,' sez he.

"'Thar is plenty o' room,' sez I.

"'I shall be crowded,' sez he. 'Look by the weepin' willer,' sez he, 'an' you kin see the three previous Mr. Joneses. She has put 'em all in a row, regardless o' their different opinions on politics, intemperance, agricultur' an' domestic infelicity. Think o' me when I git inter the row!' sez he, with a burst o' wild despair. 'The other Mr. Joneses will crowd me, an' then when other Mr. Joneses come—my unhappy successors—I shall be, classically speakin', between Priscilla an' Charybsis, but the widder won't be nowhar nigh!'"

"With that he laid his head on a picket o' the fence an' wept so loud that you'd thought thar was a thunder-shower in progress. I pitied the poor chap from the bottom o' my heart; but he braced up amazin' the next day, an' was cheerful an' resigned at the weddin'. He got his reward, too, fur the widder 'loped with a butcher—no, 'twas a baker, now I think on't—an' my cousin never got inter the row o' Mr. Joneses ter be crowded."

Yank related this alleged reminiscence with encouraging cheerfulness. He then threw his rifle across his shoulder, and prepared to depart.

"Take good keer o' yerself, Sandy," he added.

"I hope I ain't offended ye," returned the miner, meekly.

"Land o' Goshen—no! Yer conduct has been axamplery. I consait you are an honest man, an' them is what I like. Stick to it, Sandy!"

The mountaineer nodded genially, and then walked away, his face toward the high land beyond the Golden Moon.

Sandy Whiskers sat staring after him in a confused, troubled way, and when his late visitor disappeared from view he seemed to awake as from a dream. Color fled from his face, and his lips twitched convulsively.

"They suspect me!" he hoarsely whispered; "they surely suspect me. This man is kind, an' has gi'n me warnin'; but the others won't do it—they will strike without warnin'. What shall I do? Do! I'll leave Sassajack ter-day, never ter come back!"

He started to his feet, and took two long steps toward the shanty door, and then abruptly paused.

"The gals!" he muttered; "I had forgot them. Ef I go— I won't go! I'll stay an' do what I can ter help them, even ef I die for it!"

And he went slowly back to his seat near the forgotten pick.

In the mean while, Yank Yellowbird wandered on, drinking in the fresh air and the beauties of the scene as only a true admirer of nature can. He did more. He saw the peculiarities of every point as few men would, and when, shortly before noon, he returned to the shanty on Claim 21, he could have given many old residents points as to the topography of the Golden Moon.

Gladiator Gabe and Rube Herndon were just completing the forenoon's work, and Yank saw with pleasure that the outward composure of the former was nearly restored.

The mountaineer felt that these men were to be trusted; to be regarded as friends. His preference was for Herndon, both because he had been Bronx Hendershot's friend and because he was clearly the more resolute of the two; but Gabriel Dix pleased and interested him.

The massive form of the blonde gold-digger well justified his sobriquet, "Samson of Sassajack." No one could doubt that great strength lay in his large limbs and broad shoulders, and as he was free from the awkwardness of nearly all large men, Yank paid due homage to this strength.

Any embarrassment which might have attended the meeting, in view of the episode of the ring, was prevented by the mountaineer. He did not refer to the past, but talked on genially, and told a story to illustrate some point which he skillfully brought up.

He had dinner with the young miners, and then, at their earnest request, consented to remain with them awhile longer.

Gladiator Gabe was the most pertinacious in making the request, for he found Yank's unfailing good humor a great relief.

During the afternoon the mountaineer was again absent, but when he returned he came staggering under the weight of game he had secured for their common use.

After supper Gabe, for the first time, returned to the subject of the morning. Speaking privately to Rube, he said:

"I have decided not to send you to Isabel. I am going myself."

"I am glad of that," Herndon simply replied.

"Yes; I have decided to go. I only hope," and here Gabe's manner became anxious, "that all will go well!"

CHAPTER XI.

GLADIATOR GABE'S ENCOUNTER.

"SAMSON OF SASSAJACK" came to a halt under a tree. It was one of the scattered growth east of the town. Dix had left Isabel Rand a few minutes before, and had come to this place to meditate undisturbed.

He had passed a pleasant evening, but it had not been without its drawbacks. All his efforts had not kept his attention from wandering at times, and when it did so, fear and gloom fell upon him.

It was only twenty-four hours since Isabel became his promised wife, yet shadows fell between that night—shadows of the past.

She had noticed that he was troubled, and asked what was the cause. He had made some poor excuse which did not satisfy himself. It could hardly have satisfied her, but she let the subject drop.

Now that he was alone he produced his pipe and lighted it. 'Twas a humble friend which had more than once comforted and composed him when he was gloomy, and he sought its composing influence now.

He smoked for a few minutes where he was, and then wandered on. The night was calm and beautiful, and a full moon in the unclouded sky cast alternate, erratic shapes of silver and black upon the ground, as the scattered trees checked or made way for the light.

Through this scene he went thoughtfully.

He was still smoking when, without warning, he came face to face with a woman and a man in a little glade where the moonlight fell squarely, brightly upon their faces.

It might have been an ordinary meeting—it was far more than that.

The trio paused as though with a mutual understanding, and then Gladiator Gabe recoiled.

The color deserted his face, and he stood staring at the woman with a frightened expression.

An unpleasant smile passed over her face; she bowed mockingly.

"A charming evening, Mr. Dix," she said.

Her voice was musical, but through it ran a hard, scornful, sneering emphasis not pleasant to hear. Gabe spoke not; he moved not a limb.

"The dear boy knows me," she added mockingly. "Tecumseh Tubbs, you may retire."

"All right," answered her original companion.

"But not any great distance. Remain within sound of my voice; our dear friend, Gabe, might take a fancy to murder me."

"He'd better not while I'm 'round!" declared her escort. "I'm from Arkansas, I be; an' I've eat raw beef ever sence I was three days old. I come o' a family half grizzly b'ar, half catamount an' half rattlesnake; an' when we yell, it's half growl, half yell an' half rat—"

"That will do, sir!" the woman interrupted.

"It won't do. I'm on record as referrin' ter a rat, an' that wa'n't my object. 'Rattle,' I were erbout ter say."

Having put himself right, the man from Arkansas withdrew to a neighboring tree.

"Now, Gabe Dix, what has become of your tongue?" the woman resumed.

Samson of Sassajack drew a long breath. The delay had given him time to recover a little; he aroused, but only to meet keener suffering.

"It is you!" he muttered hoarsely.

"It is I—I, Sybilla."

"Back from the grave."

"To meet you."

"I wish I had died before you came!" he broke forth vehemently.

"That was your lookout, not mine. You have had ample time. If you aspired to die, why didn't you do it?"

The unfeeling brutality of the words did not effect Gladiator Gabe.

"Not dead," he murmured.

"To your great sorrow—no!"

He passed his hand to his head like one dazed.

"I must say, old chap, that you don't receive me so lovingly as you did once. Would you be so cold if Isabel Rand was here?"

Gabe started violently, but no answer passed his white lips.

"Between you and me," pursued Sybilla, "don't you think that Isabel is charming?"

"In Heaven's name, forbear!" he fiercely replied.

"As you will, old boy; as you will. Let me take your arm while we promenade—"

She advanced, but Gabe imperiously waved her back.

"Keep your distance!" he exclaimed. "Your mere touch is contamination."

"You didn't think so once. You declared that my lips were red roses, and then you had a passion for roses. You've plucked a good many, old fellow!"

Gabe made a great effort to be calm.

"Enough of childish talk," he answered.

"You are alive; you are here. What do you want?"

"How do you know that I want anything?"

"You would not otherwise come to me."

"You are right."

"Well?"

"Well!" she mockingly repeated.

"You think you can play with me as a cat with a mouse. Don't press me too far; I warn you don't do it. I have plainly asked you what you want. I now repeat the question. Come to the point!"

"Gentle as ever; you could not be peremptory, old boy, could you? What do I want? Suppose that I want to enter high life at Sassajack, and have you introduce me?"

"I decline."

"Why?"

"I will not do the least thing to help you. Of course your last words—your imaginary case—was an empty sneer, but that does not matter. Understand me, I will not yield to you in the least!"

"Not even to introduce me to Isabel?"

"Forbear!" he cried.

"You tire me, old man. Why 'forbear?'"

"Your lips are not fit to speak the name of

any respectable woman. Abuse me as you will, but do not carry your venom too far."

"And so I am not to speak of sweet Isabel—"

He made a long forward step, and would have grasped her arm, but she as quickly receded, and the moonlight flashed upon a revolver in her hand.

"Stand there, Gabe Dix!" she said, in a hard voice. "I am capable of protecting myself. I have a man a few feet away who could crush you with his hand—a desperate fighter, who is—"

"Half grizzly b'ar, half cat—"

Tecumseh Tubbs's voice had sounded from the darkness, but Sybilla only allowed herself to be interrupted for a moment.

"I shall not call him," she added. "If you lay hand upon me, I shoot; and I may as well say that I can drive a nail at as great distance as any man."

Gabriel did not answer. The check he had received was nothing compared to his old-time knowledge of this woman. He knew her fiery temper, her wickedness and her stubborn will; and the knowledge told him now that there was no way except to summon patience and bear her sneers.

"When you are ready to speak, do so," he answered, almost calmly.

"That is more like it, old chap, and it seems very pleasant. I felt sure you would welcome me to Sassajack. You always were kind to me."

"Yes—poor, weak fool that I was!"

"How well you understand yourself, Gabe!"

"Sneer on," he steadily returned; "I can bear it. I was a weak fool ever to trust you. I know it now, and I know you as well as I do myself."

"Describe me!" was the flippant retort.

"You are all that is hard, bitter, treacherous and criminal—a libel on the name of woman."

"Thanks, old fellow, awfully!" and Sybilla dropped a courtesy. "How you boil it down!"

"And now, will you tell me what you want? Is it money?"

"No."

"I will pay you to go away."

"I won't go."

"Perhaps you will explain why you are here?"

"To be near you!"

"What fiend's plot have you in mind?" Gabe vehemently demanded.

Sybilla laughed softly.

"Possibly I can throw light upon your mind. I have come to Sassajack—for my health. Worn out by hard labor—I am very poor, and have to work—oh! so hard!—I have found my health seriously impaired, so I have come to the valley of the Golden Moon to breathe the pure air—and be near you. Here I shall stay; money won't bribe me to leave. I shall stay, and, while here, I intend to keep my eyes open; I shall know all that is transpiring. Having made the acquaintance of all the nice gents and girls, I shall take a friendly interest in their love-affairs—possibly, too, give them good advice, at times. How is that, old chap?"

She ceased her hard, coarse address, and waited for Gladiator Gabe to speak. He did nothing of the kind. He had folded his arms, and was standing like a statue, an absent expression on his face.

"It is quite useless to offer me money to leave," she added, after a pause.

"I shall offer none."

He spoke mechanically, and then turned away.

"Where are you going?" Sybilla asked.

"Home!"

The reply was short and stern.

"As you will, old man; of course I can't hope to have you to myself all the time; but now that you know I am here you will be happier, won't you?"

There was no answer; Gabe was striding away rapidly, but his step lacked its old firmness. He seemed to be utterly crushed.

"Au revoir!" Sybilla called mockingly. "Tecumseh Tubbs, come forth. There will be no fight now, but, my word for it, there is fun ahead!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE HUT IN THE GLADE.

It was late when Gabriel Dix again approached Claim 21. Herndon and Yank Yellowbird had sat by the door and talked for a considerable time, but the former finally lay down on his blanket and went to sleep. Rube was outside when his partner reappeared.

Gabe's face was fairly calm, giving no clew to the state of his mind, and Rube had seen that which led him to believe that he would be in a more cheerful frame of mind.

"A fine evening, Gabe," remarked his partner.

"Yes."

"I judge that you have been enjoying it."

"Why so?"

"I saw you walking in the timber with Isabel Rand."

"Where were you to see that?"

"I had been over to Randall's, and, coming back, saw you at a distance in a glade. Give me credit for not intruding upon you."

"I appreciate your motives, but you are

wrong in one particular. The person whom you saw was not Isabel Rand."

"Not Isabel?"

"No."

Rube looked sharply at his partner. Gabe had answered quietly, but there was that in his voice which told Rube that the evening interview had not been pleasant. He remembered the events of the morning, and hesitated as to his next words. Dix saved him from the necessity of reply by continuing, after a pause:

"Rube, we have been partners for a long time."

"That is true, Gabe."

"I fancy few men have worked together more harmoniously."

"Such a thing would be impossible. We have never had the least quarrel."

"True, old friend. Week after week, and month after month, we have swung the pick here together, and always with the best of feeling. I shall never forget it. I have found you a man so be trusted and honored; a man whose heart is as big as a man's can be. It has been a peaceful, memorable time, Rube!"

Herndon looked more keenly at the speaker. What meant this tribute? It was like Gladiator Gabe, yet his voice and manner were melancholy.

"Your own words," Rube answered, "may be returned by me. Peace and good will have been our lot."

"I am glad to hear you say it, for you will more fully appreciate what comes next. The days of our partnership are past; I leave Sassajack and the valley of the Golden Moon to-morrow!"

"What!" Herndon exclaimed.

"I am about to bid you farewell."

"Isn't this sudden?"

"Yes; but I am not acting hastily. I have no choice in the matter. I go, and for a time you will lose sight of me. Where I shall go I don't know, but I shall bury myself in the wildest place I can find—perhaps in the gold-mines of Arizona."

"And Isabel?"

"I shall never see her again!"

The words fell from his lips in a burst of emotion which seemed to be echo of mental agony. Rube looked at him with painful anxiety.

"Gabe, has she recalled her promise? Has she proved false?"

"No, no; she is all that is good and true. If it were otherwise I could bear it, but it will pain her as well as me. I dare not see her again; I shall go without seeing her; I shall never see her again; and in the wretched days to come it will be an additional load upon my mind to know that she despises me!"

"Samson of Sassajack," clinched his broad hands, and his chest heaved like a woman's in her hour of passionate mental agony. Rube Herndon hesitated for a moment; then his hand was placed gently upon his partner's arm.

"Gabe, you are in sore trouble. Can I help you?"

"No one can help me."

"Trouble has come to you, and because of that you are going to give up Isabel, and flee from here?"

"Yes."

The monosyllable fell hoarsely from Gabe's lips, but he made no move toward confiding in his friend. A less thoughtful man than Herndon might have asked bluntly for an explanation, but this was far from being Rube's way. Deeply as he sympathized with Gabe he would not ask for unwilling confidence, and he took it for granted that his partner had good reason for withholding that confidence. His active mind grasped such points as were visible, however; he remembered the episode of the ring, and the woman in the timber who was not Isabel Rand; and a vague theory was built upon these circumstances.

The difference in the nature of the men then became visible. Rube laid his hand more firmly upon the young giant's arm.

"Gabe, I am not placed so that I can advise you intelligently, for your case is not clear to me, but I want to say a few words on general principles. You remember the old Latin expression, 'Nil desperandum,' don't you? Translate it 'Never despair,' or 'Never say die'—or anyway you will—it gives good advice. So I say that on general principles my advice is, keep good courage and fight to the last. A battle is not lost until somebody else has won it; hence, it behooves us to fight to the last. Now, you lose all by going away, don't you?"

"All!"

Gabriel Dix echoed the word with a world of meaning.

"Do you—can you lose more by staying?"

"No; but I should stay to meet pain and mortification; I should stay to fight a hopeless fight."

"No fight is lost until somebody else wins it. If you have an enemy, why let that enemy triumph easily? Why not remain and fight to the last? Why not give blow for blow? Why give your enemy an easy victory? Why not take the chance—however small it may be—that you will win in the end?"

His voice and manner were full of brave en-

couragement, but no light of hope appeared on Gabe's face. He knew all too well how small his chances were.

An expression of a different kind did appear on his face. Rube had instilled a part of his strong, determined nature into his more yielding friend's mind, and "Samson's" face gradually grew firm and stubborn.

"Perhaps you are right, Rube," he answered, "and I will, at least, take further time for thought. I will not leave Sassajack to-morrow. And now let us go to the shanty!"

He spoke the last words abruptly, as though he feared questioning, and as abruptly turned toward the shanty. He might have spared himself his fears; there was no danger that Herndon would seek to know his secret.

It might have been better if the confidence had then been made.

They went to their blankets, but it was late when Gabriel Dix lost realization of his troubles in slumber.

Morning found the scene unchanged, but Gabe was outwardly calmer than was to be expected. When breakfast was eaten he addressed Yank Yellowbird:

"Are you going into the hills to-day?"

"Sech was my idee," Nevermiss answered.

"With your leave, I will take half a day with you."

"My leave is granted afore it's asked; it'll please me walter hev ye along. The Yellowbirds are o' a companionable natur', anyhow. This has led ter most on 'em bein' married men. My father was, an' my gran'father, an' his father would 'a' b'en only he took the whoopin'-cough so voy'lently when a child that it carried him off when he's a month old. 'Member distinctly what a large caucus o' folks 'tended the funeral obsequies. I consait," and here Yank leveled his index finger and shook it gravely at Rube, "that more old women congregated at my great-gran'father's funeral than I ever see'd tergether afore or sence. They filled the hull egregious house, an' more'n fifty on 'em was outside, hangin' ter the window-sills with their teeth an' peekin' in. You see, they'd b'en favorites o' my great-gran'father—he died afore his judgment was good. Ready, Gabe?"

"All ready."

"Then come on. You'll observe, Rube, that we both have our guns; thar'll be piles o' work ter do in the culinary department when we come back. 'Culinary' is the 'ristocracy name fur kitchen."

"Culinary is the word, I believe."

"To be sure. So I said, an' I don't often make a blunder. The Yellowbirds aim ter be right." The mountaineer nodded genially, and walked away with Gabe by his side.

The latter had not planned the trip without more of an object than the travel and probable experience with game afforded. He had gone thinking that nothing would cheer him so much as Yank Yellowbird's society. There was something irresistible about the veteran's manner. His odd, whimsical remarks and stories were spiced with a charm peculiarly his own. His good humor was unflinching, and his plain, rugged, honest face was well worth watching at any time.

This was Gabe's idea; hence, the trip.

They reached the high ridges which formed the top of Golden Moon Valley, and there the hunting began. It was continued in a desultory way for three hours, during more than half of which time they were taking their ease lying under some tree. The hunting was more of a pretense than a reality, and neither aspired to kill promiscuously.

After awhile they bent their steps homeward.

Unconsciously to Gabe their course was past the gulch where Sandy Whiskers had his lone shanty. A turn among the rough rocks brought them out upon the edge of the cliff, and both naturally looked down.

One of them paused abruptly.

It was Gladiator Gabe who was most interested. He saw the miner's hut; he saw Sandy Whiskers, himself. Nor was this all. Another man, and a woman, stood by the door of the little building, and Gabe knew them at first sight.

The man was Tecumseh Tubbs; the woman was Sybilla.

They had an air of being at home which indicated that they had become permanently established there, and Gabe clinched his hand and compressed his brows with no good will.

"Our old friend, Sandy Whiskers," quietly observed the mountaineer. "I consait he must 'a' started a boarding-house, as his poperlation seems increasin'. One on 'em is a woman, an' fair ter look upon, though I can't say I jest like her 'pearance. Sort o' loud an' bold, strikes me. Mebbe Sandy has married her, an' took that red-faced chap fur a page, or footman, or some sort o' a sarvint. The woman may be a good soul, but that Tubbs I don't like. He's a scoffer an' a braggart; he is, by hurley!"

Yank frowned as he remembered the levity Tecumseh had used in speaking of his lower extremities, and then, as Gabe did not reply, slowly added:

"I'm sorry ter see Sandy mixin' with 'em, fur he's a good feller, Sandy is."

"He's a scoundrel!" fiercely exclaimed Dix.

"Land o' Goshen! you don't say so!"

"I did say so, didn't I?"

"To be sure; but only this mornin' you give yer opinion that Sandy wouldn't do nothin' mean intentional. Sudden change o' heart, as 'twere."

"My eyes are opened at last, and I know him for the villain he is. Nevermiss, shall I lend my day's hunt with one more shot?"

And the speaker raised his rifle to his shoulder, and directed the muzzle toward the group in the gulch.

CHAPTER XIII.

PERILS SEEN AND UNSEEN.

THE mountaineer saw this hostile demonstration without a change of countenance. Had Rube Herndon been his companion he might have made an abrupt movement to check the rifleman, but he had read Dix too well to fear that a tragedy would result.

"They make a pooty fair target, I consait," he quietly returned, "but as fur game, they count low. You can't cook 'em, an' keep yer stand'in' in perlite society; though I hev heard o' folkses who cooked frogs' legs. A most egregious funny dish, I should say; I'd rather hev a ramrod with a rag 'round it. Ain't you goin' ter shoot?"

Gabe had lowered his rifle.

"No."

"Jest as wal, perhaps."

"They deserve it, though. I have tried to excuse the man Sandy Whiskers, believing that he was mentally irresponsible, but this discovery places matters in a new light. I know his companions; and I now know how to place Sandy Whiskers. He is a villain, and I only wish the wrath of the lynchers had not been meddled with by Rube and you—though you both did what you thought right."

"Who's the woman, anyhow?" asked Yank, stroking his head in a perturbed way.

"Don't ask me."

"It's sorter hard ter believe Sandy an atrocious insex."

"He would not otherwise shelter her!"

Gabe made a fierce gesture toward Sybilla.

"He may not know the sort o' female he's took in," the mountaineer suggested.

As though to promptly overthrow this lenient view, matters in the gulch took a new turn.

Sybilla approached Sandy Whiskers and sat down by his side. The observers were too far away to overhear anything, or even to follow expressions clearly, but her manner was free, confident, and not without a certain sort of tenderness. She laid her hand upon his arm and, looking up into his face, smiled bewitchingly.

Gabe clinched his hands convulsively; he knew her caressing, feline ways of old; and he could well imagine how she was, in some way or other, using her arts upon the simple-minded miner. He indistinctly heard Yank mutter, "Case o' courtship, with the gal as plaintiff, by hurley!" but for his own part he could not look at the matter lightly.

He felt a sort of fierce joy, in a certain degree, as he saw the woman's arts. Having decided that Sandy Whiskers was her partner in crime, he believed that he could also see the means by which she bound him to her—the treachery of a female Judas. And if she was trying to fascinate him, she would end by breaking his heart.

A few feet apart from them sat Tecumseh Tubbs. He looked as though he was indifferent to all things but—his tobacco. Sitting with his back to the wall of the shanty he smoked his short, black pipe and looked as stolidly content as though the world began and ended with him and he was glad of it.

Yank Yellowbird's attention was not all on the trio in the gulch. At times he looked at Gabe, whose perturbation was plainly visible, and though the veteran's gray eyes appeared as mild as ever, it was a thoughtful, analytical gaze that he bent upon his companion.

Several minutes passed, and then Gabe turned away.

"Come," he said, to Yank; "let us go."

The mountaineer put out a restraining hand. "Wait a bit," he replied. "Thar are more travelers abroad, an' pooty ones, at that."

He pointed up the gulch.

Gabe Dix looked, and then started violently. Two girls were advancing along the gulch, their course directly toward the shanty, and the young giant grew pale as he recognized Isabel and Ruth Rand.

Well might the sight startle him. They would see Sybilla—perhaps speak with her—and he would rather see them near a rattlesnake.

"Land o' Goshen! ain't they pooty!" muttered Nevermiss. "Faces like a bed o' roses; trim built as young saplin's; step like an antelope's; an' a gin'ral air o' sweetness like a spring o' water in a desert. Natur' did wal when she created them; she did very wal; she did most egregious wal, sir!"

He turned toward Gabe with a beaming face, but what he saw there dampened his enthusiasm. It was clear that in some way the presence of the Rand sisters in the gulch deepened "Sam-

son's" trouble, and the sympathetic borderer grew grave and silent.

Isabel and Ruth continued to advance, and their manner indicated what was the truth—they were surprised to see the shanty there, and having no idea to whom it belonged, were looking with considerable curiosity.

Suddenly, they seemed to hesitate. They had recognized Sandy Whiskers, and, true to their belief that he was not of sound mind, were not sure that it would be well to go near his shanty. They were reassured by just what would have had a contrary effect, if they had known all—the presence of Sybilla.

The presence of a woman seemed a safeguard, and they hesitated only for a moment.

Gladiator Gabe stood holding nervously to a young tree. He mentally prayed that the girls would turn back, but his hopes were fruitless. He did not think of warning them, even if such a thing had met his approval, and they went on blindly.

Another person had been using her eyes, and when Isabel and Ruth reached a point near her, Sybilla arose and accosted them.

Gabe set his teeth tightly and watched with eyes so full of unspoken sentiments that Yank was startled.

Evidently it was not the part of Sybilla to alarm the girls, and her manner was frank, friendly and full of gracious sweetness. Gabe knew how she could assume this role, and he groaned inwardly. What mischief might she not do? Young, fairly good-looking and plausible, she was just the one to win the fancy and good will of the average observer.

Yank Yellowbird had given an unfavorable opinion, but it was not every one who could read character like the veteran of mountain and prairie.

Unable to overhear a word, Gabe watched in mental agony. He saw that the conversation was pleasant and light; saw that Sybilla was exerting all her arts, and that the Rand sisters were apparently meeting her advances with friendly interest.

"Yank," he suddenly said, "did you ever hear the line, 'Deliver us from temptation!'"

"My mother taught it to me when I's a little chap on her knee," Nevermiss gravely, solemnly replied.

"Have you obeyed the injunction?"

"I consait I hev, ter the best o' my ability. True, I've slipped up, now an' then, jest an artem; but we're all human. Yas, we're all humans, an' weak at that, an' full o' frailties an' backslidin's."

"It would be an easy shot to cover one of those persons in the gulch."

"Yas, but you won't do it, an' I won't do it," answered Yank, with mild confidence. "We ain't the kind that shoots onawares, an' stabs in the back."

"No; but there are those near who are of that kind. They stab in the back, and stab to the heart. It is a serious thing, mountaineer, to wreck a human life, yet there are those who have done it."

"I've heard it said," steadily observed Nevermiss, "that wickedness only prospers for a season, an' I consait it is so. Now, thar ain't no good reason why a man who has b'en wronged should set back on his hind legs like a Hottentot idyl an' let the charrylot o' fate roll over him. Man is 'lowed ter defend his life ag'in' atrocious insex—why not his peace and happiness? Ef I had an enemy who was prosecutin' me, an' saturnitin' me with triberlation an' distress, I'd rise up like a Numidian lion—or an old 'Midian lion, either, fur that matter—an' I'd meet him p'int fur p'int, an' blow fur blow. 'Tain't natur' fur a man ter let hisself be crushed."

Yank looked directly at Gabe, and, though as mild as ever, his face was firm and significant. Gabe understood him, and the unaffected address calmed and strengthened him.

They looked back at the group in the gulch. Much to Gabe's relief Isabel and Ruth had just left Sybilla, and were continuing their journey.

"Follow me!" the young giant directed, quickly. "I notice that the fellow Tubbs has disappeared, and I am not sure where he has gone."

"He skulked over ter the east side o' the gulch, an' then dis'peared among the rocks."

"All the more need why we should go; I don't like to have Isabel and Ruth walk unguarded. We will keep near, but not address them unless there is occasion for it. I would rather remain unseen."

They had gone toward the south, and then the lower end of the gulch was soon reached. They passed on, keeping the girls in sight, but screening their own movements successfully. It was destined, however, that this secrecy was not to be continued, and that Gabe's suspicions should receive confirmation. They made a slight detour to avoid following the girls through a gulch where there was no cover, and when they came out on more level ground a rough voice brought them to a halt.

Not twenty feet away, just beyond a fringe of bushes, they saw Isabel and Ruth, and there, too, was Tecumseh Tubbs.

The fellow had done all that was expected of him, and had at last seized Isabel by the arm;

while she, frightened yet defiant, was trying to break away.

Gladiator Gabe waited for no more. With a tiger-like leap he shot through the fringe of bushes, and in a moment more his hands were upon Tecumseh's person. The defender's eyes flashed indignantly, but the man from Arkansas did not have a chance then to see it.

With a great effort of his muscular arms the young giant raised the ponderous Tecumseh from the ground; he swung the heavy weight aloft as though it had been nothing, and then the man from Arkansas was cast headlong away.

He fell to the ground with a heavy shock.

Another moment and Gabe had thrown his arm around Isabel, while Yank Yellowbird came out of the bushes and nodded genially to Ruth.

"Don't be skeered, little woman," said he. "We'll defend ye while thar's a man left. Ef thar's any one thing we dote on it's rescuin' females, 'specially sech ones as you."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE WORK OF AN ENEMY.

It was a most agreeable interruption, and the fact that the girls were safe was so apparent that both at once rallied, and Isabel smiled into Gabe's face.

"A genuine adventure, isn't it, Gabe?" she coolly observed. "And you two gentlemen have come like old-time cavaliers to save us."

"To be sure—to be sure!" Yank answered, readily. "It's a way we hev. Whar beauty is in distress, thar we go. Our battle-axes will be seen movin' above our helmets, an' our lances an' six-shooters will be stuck inter our belts. The Yellowbirds are egregious fur sech things. One o' my cousins was a knight o' the Dark Ages, an' he saved so many pooty females that he kep' three men all the time grindin' his battle-axes, which he'd dulled a-backin' atrocious insex with."

"We have an 'atrocious insex' here," said Gabe, indicating Tecumseh Tubbs, who, partially stunned, was now sitting up and mournfully rubbing his head.

"I consait so," Nevermiss replied.

"Perhaps he wishes to persist in his intentions."

"No, he don't!" cried Tecumseh. "I'm a raw-beef eater from Arkansas, but I know when beef won't agree with me. I'm down, an' I'm purty nigh all smashed ter pieces."

"Miss Rand," continued Gabe, "has this scoundrel carried his infamy to an extreme?"

"He asked leave to walk with us, and, when we refused, he caught my arm and declared that he would do so."

"More fool me!" muttered Tubbs, as he slowly regained his feet.

"Apologize to these ladies, sir!"

"Sartain," was the cheerful response. "Ladies, I've been a monster; I beg yer parding, an' hope as how you'll overlook my voylence."

"One word more," added Dix. "Molest these ladies again, and you will get a broken head."

"I don't doubt but ye kin do it. I'm a member o' a fam'ly half-grizzly bear, half-catamount an' half-rattlesnake; an' I've 'lowed I was some on the fight; but I wouldn't tackle you fur half o' Arkansas as a free alimony."

"That man," quoth Yank, pointing to Gabe, "is named Rocky Mountain Samson."

"He looks it, by thunder! I b'lieve I've see'd you afore, old boss. Got licked by ye, too. Fur a fightin' man, my flag waves rather low!"

"You can go now," directed Gabe. "Look to it that you don't get in my way again. Be careful, Tecumseh Tubbs, what company you keep, or some of your friends may lead you into danger. I have you marked, and if you get in my way again, I shall not let you off so easily."

"An Arkansas man knows when he's licked," good-humoredly asserted Tubbs, "an' I'm one. Licked twice since I come ter Sassajack! By thunder! I'm afeerd I'm half-sheep, half-cat an' half-rat, but mostly sheep. Farewell!"

The cheerful rascal waved his hand and sauntered away toward the gulch. Yank Yellowbird shook his head gravely. He did not like the man any the more because he was cheerful, for, strange as the mountaineer considered it, it was clear that he was a thorough scoundrel, and all the more dangerous because he could mask his feelings.

Gabe suggested an immediate return to the village, and when he had introduced Yank, the quartette moved away.

"Rocky Mountain Samson's" mind was far from being at ease, but he proceeded to do what he regarded as his duty without delay. He had seen Isabel talking with a woman in the gulch; did she know that woman? She did not; had never seen her before. He knew something of the woman, and that not to her credit; he would advise Isabel not to make her acquaintance in reality. Isabel would cheerfully comply; neither she nor Ruth had liked the woman, despite her plausible ways; they had shortened the interview in the gulch as much as possible, and did not want to meet her again.

Gabe was greatly relieved, and all the more so because he was asked no questions.

This was because Isabel saw that he did not

care to explain. She knew there was something back of all this, and arrived at the conclusion that it was not to Sybilla's credit.

This satisfied her for the time, but the day might come when such a simple theory would not suffice.

Gabe and Yank accompanied the girls to their home, and then once more bent their steps toward Claim 21.

That afternoon Gabe worked with Rube Herndon, and, except for occasional lapses, was more cheerful than his partner had dared to hope, though unusual good-luck may have had something to do with it. The claim had never before paid so well as during the last week, and this day was the most promising of all.

Yank passed the day in the hills, as usual, and by that time he knew them well. He was not pleased with Sassajack, however. Without knowing why, he had taken a dislike to the camp, and would have moved on to new scenes had it not been for one reason.

He foresaw trouble at the valley of the Golden Moon.

Already his active mind had seized upon many of the points of the brewing storm—far more than Gabe or Rube suspected—and he had considerable curiosity to see how it would end.

Consequently, he decided to remain for awhile.

That evening was a memorable one. The two young men and the mountaineer remained in the shanty, and Yank, being in an unusually talkative mood, told numerous stories, and deluged them with characteristic remarks.

It was late when they lay down, and, wearied with his day's work, Rube soon fell asleep. He slept soundly for hours, but finally fell under the malign influence of a dream in which he thought that he was in the excavation made by their mining operations; that the bank fell in and buried him under its suffocating weight.

He struggled to release himself; he gasped for air, but no relief came to his burdened lungs; he sprang to his feet.

He was awake at last; he was in the shanty, not in the excavation; but there was still the difficulty of breathing. He drew in a great breath of air, but it strangled and pained him. It was heavily charged with smoke. He saw a red glare around him, too, which could have but one meaning.

The shanty was on fire!

Recovering his presence of mind, he staggered toward the door. He had gone but a few steps when strong arms closed around him. He struggled—unable to see because of the smoke that was in his eyes, he suspected that the unknown was an enemy.

"Bear up, Reuben; bear up! We'll be in fresh air d'reckly, I consait."

The voice fell reassuringly upon his hearing; the speaker could be none other than Yank Yellowbird. His help was scarcely needed; Rube was almost at the door, and in a moment more they were in the open air.

It was a welcome change to Herndon.

He turned about and saw the shanty completely in the grasp of the flames. As yet they had touched the inside but little, but walls and roof were alike a mass of fire.

The cabin was doomed; only a plentiful supply of water directed by a hose could have saved it, and these were not at hand.

Gladiator Gabe came up at that moment.

"Shall I alarm the camp?" he asked, his voice sounding thick and husky.

"No!" Yank exclaimed.

"Why?"

"Could they save yer house?"

"No."

"Then let 'em sleep on; they'll do more hurt than good of they come hyar, an' egregious sight."

"I am willing to leave it as you say, but in what way will they do harm?"

The mountaineer leaned his tall form upon his rifle and looked steadily at Gabe.

"How do you consait this fire ketched?"

"Do you think it was incendiary?"

"I think somebody set it—I do, by hurley! The cookin'-fire was all out afore we turned in, an' though we all did some smokin', a spark from our pipes would hev started a fire inside, not out. Besides, look hyar!"

Nevermiss thrust a stick into the blaze and scattered a quantity of blazing brands.

"Small sticks piled up ag'in' the shanty-wall, ter feed the fire," he added.

"We are convinced, Yank; we would be blind to dispute you," Herndon replied. "It was the work of an incendiary."

"But who was he?" Gabe asked.

"A inemy o' one or both ov ye; some atrocious insex who had a grudge ag'in' ye, an' took this way o' satisfyin' it."

Both Rube and Gabe instinctively glanced toward Claim 22. The shanty occupied by Parkman and Jackingham was dark and silent.

"Does s'pishion pint that way?" Yank steadily asked, for nothing escaped his keen eyes.

"In my opinion, it does," Rube answered.

The veteran meditated for a moment.

"My objick in sayin' we didn't want a crowd hyar was that I was afeerd they'd blot out any tracks the fire-bugs might 'a' left—I hope this time, the sneakers didn't wear stockin's—but I

ain't sure but the time ter do the trailin' is now. Let me git a brand, an' I'll look about."

"Parkman and Jackingham are no friends of ours," Herndon explained, "and I believe them to be villains. It was a sly word from Jackingham that put Sandy Whiskers in danger, the night of the ball. I overheard it, and, fearing that he would be harmed, followed to the grove. You know how you and I stopped the lynchers, mountaineer. Jackingham would have sacrificed that unfortunate man, and this, I believe, is a fair specimen of what he and Parkman will do."

Rocky Mountain Samson had frowned at the mention of Sandy Whiskers's name. His latest opinion of the lone miner did not agree with Rube's.

By this time Yank had a firebrand which he believed would answer his purpose, and he started to look for the incendiaries' trail.

CHAPTER XV.

LOOKING FOR A FIRE-BUG.

YANK YELLOWBIRD was once more himself. The inactivity of his life at Sassajack had dulled his sense of enjoyment, but the moment that he bent his eyes upon the ground to look for the trail, he was noticeably a different man. This was his old work, and his mild gray eyes grew firmer and steadier.

He held the torch close to the ground and began to move about. It was not long before Rube knew that some discovery had been made. It was clear in every way; the traitor's movements grew steadier and more direct.

Rube detected a footprint, and touched it with his toe.

"That's it, lad," Yank approvingly remarked; "you hev a keen eye. Thar's a track, an' it ain't yours, nor Gabe's, nor mine; an' it's a fresh track, too. We'll foller it."

He started off, but the firebrand suddenly flew from his hand, falling several feet away. At almost the same moment the sharp crack of a rifle rung out on the air.

The miners looked toward the timber, from whence the shot had plainly come, but the mountaineer did more. With one hand he reached the cover of a bowlder which lay a few feet away, and dropped behind it.

"Ter cover!" he exclaimed. "Put the cabin 'tween you an' the woods. The atrocious insex may try ag'in'!"

Mechanically the young men obeyed, each covering himself. Their weapons and nearly all their valuables had been saved by Yank and Gabe from the flames—it was only by an oversight that Rube was left so long in the burning building. Then, being unable to see the timber, they watched the mountaineer.

He had but imperfectly sheltered himself, for he hoped that some further manifestation would follow from the man who had attempted his life. It was only chance that the bullet had knocked the brand from his hand, and he knew it; whoever had fired had intended to hit him, and it was the purposed following of the trail that had brought it about.

Yank lay with his rifle advanced, watching the quarter of danger intently. It would have fared ill with any man who had then showed himself, but no one did.

For several moments those gray eyes—now keen and full of fire—never moved; then they wavered to the younger men.

"The atrocious insex ain't comin'. I consait he wants ter intice me inter the woods, an' by hurley, I'm goin'. My left foot is a weak sister, but the warlike blood o' the Yellowbirds is rampant in the rest o' my anatomy, an' I ain't goin' ter refuse the challenge."

"Don't expose yourself uselessly, mountaineer," urged Herndon.

"I won't, but I want that egregious critter ter onn'erstand that I ain't no targit put up fur him ter try his luck at. You stay hyar an' keep intruders off'm the claim, an' I'll go ter the woods. The weak sister has actually plucked up courage an' agrees, which is a thing it ain't done afore sence I was in Arizona. It's funny, by hurley!"

There was a period of silence, during which Yank may have been meditating on the eccentric ways of the "weak sister," and then he suddenly added:

"Somebody has said that a bird in the hand is wuth two in the bush, an' I consait we'll let that feller rest a bit. Fu't o' all, I'm goin' ter foller this trail."

"But the man in the timber will fire again," urged Gabe, anxious for the mountaineer's safety.

"Let him fire!" Yank retorted. "I ain't goin' ter be driv' from my work by him. Thar ain't one chance in fifty he kin shoot so close ag'in. He's in the dark, an' the distance is considerable. I'll resk him!"

The veteran arose boldly. He turned a keen, watchful gaze toward the wood, but no shot followed. Then he strode to the blazing cabin and provided himself with another brand.

Rube and Gabe would not allow him to monopolize the danger, and they, too, came out.

Nevermiss moved rapidly. Recovering the trail, he proceeded to follow it with unerring sagacity. It was not hard. To his trained eyes

all was as plain as day. On he went until he had reached the limit of the claim.

The trail continued on Claim 22.

The three men exchanged glances. It might be only chance, but it was very significant that it led to the claim occupied by Parkman and Jackingham.

"What do you make of it?" Gabe asked.

"Jest this much," Yank replied. "I've see'd the tracks."

"And will know them again?"

"Yes."

"Then we need make no useless surmises."

"We'll do more; we'll foller them tracks. Ef they end at anybody's door, you know what ter do."

"We do, Nevermiss. Lead on!"

Yank started. Every one felt that a crisis was at hand. Suspicion pointed to the occupants of Claim 22, and if the trail led there, trouble might at once ensue. Yank had an idea as to what the next act would be, and his theory was confirmed in every particular.

They had not advanced three yards upon the other claim when a voice sounded from the shanty, and then a man suddenly appeared at the door. He was bare-headed, and, dimly seen by the light of the fire, seemed to have just left his blanket.

It was Wells Parkman.

His voice rung out quickly.

"Something is wrong!" he cried. "Herndon's shanty is on fire. Quick, Asa! We may be in time to save it. Hurry up!"

Already he was running toward the trio, and Jackingham was close behind him. Suddenly he saw, or pretended to see, Yank, Rube and Gabe.

"Ha! is it you?" he added. "I'm glad to see you—I was afraid for a moment that you were in the fire."

"Thank ye!" returned Yank, dryly, and rather vaguely.

"Lucky for you that you are out."

"Sorter, sorter."

"How did it catch?"

"Struck by the tail o' a comet."

"Impossible! But—can't we save it?"

Parkman looked anxiously toward the blazing shanty. If he was acting a part, his work was not bad.

"You might try," Yank answered, in the brief, dry way he had all along used.

"Hurry up, then! Fall too, Asa! What! ain't the rest of you going?"

Yank Yellowbird drew himself erect. He had seized the opportunity when Parkman shifted his position to drop one end of his firebrand near the ground and examine the footprint made by that person as he shifted his position.

It was exactly the same as the tracks they had been following. One of the fire-bugs was revealed to the mountaineer as plainly as he could wish.

"Mister," he answered, very quietly, "ef you hev a hankerin' ter tackle the flames you kin, pervidin' these two gentlemen is willin', but you might as wal try ter put out the sun ter-morrer mornin'."

Even as he spoke, the shanty fell in like a broken egg-shell.

"Too late!" Parkman exclaimed.

"But not too late for vengeance!" retorted Gabe.

"Vengeance!"

"So I said, sir."

"I don't understand."

Yank had given Gabe a warning look, and the hint was at once taken.

"I consait it is rather tough ter lose a body's house," the mountaineer volubly said, "but then, one as good-as that kin be throwed up in a few hours. True, it won't be quite ekul ter some St. Louis palaces, but what's the odds? Sassajack ain't St. Louis, nohow. I wish my cousin, Nehemiah Yellowbird, was hyar now. He's a carpenter, he was; an' the way he could handle a hammer an' saw was amazin', though his best holt was on a hammer. He'd take that an' wade in, an' the style in which he would put sills, rafters, freshsoles, c'andle-ears, rackets, hoists, lamb-skins an' other parts tergether was egregious s'prisin'. I'd send fur him now, but he died some ten year ago last June, I think 'twas."

Parkman waited impatiently for Yank to finish.

"You were coming for help, I suppose," he then said. "You did right, and I am only sorry that it is too late."

At this moment three other men arrived, and more were seen in the distance. Yank touched Rube's arm.

"Don't be s'prised ef I'm missin', soon," he said, in a low voice. "I'm goin' ter 'vestigate that feller in the timber, an' I'll slip away quiet."

"Let me go with you," Herndon urged.

The mountaineer hesitated.

"I am not exactly a novice," Rube added.

"As ye will, lad; as ye will. I'll speak ter Gabe, fur he needs a caution. He's in a be'l'ig'rent mood, Gabriel is; an' it ain't my will that a disturbance he kicked up right away. Soft an' slow is the cue, I consait."

"We will leave it to you, Nevermiss."

The other men came hurrying up, until a dozen were at hand. They had come from the nearest claims, and each and all showed their sympathy in words and actions. It was no slight thing for a miner to lose his dwelling, humble though it might be. Material for a shanty was not easy to get, and there was the delay in mining operations to be endured while the new shanty was going up.

Rube saw Yank speaking with Rocky Mountain Samson, but his own attention was mainly given to the other men.

"How did it catch?" asked one.

Rube saw Wells Parkman's gaze fixed eagerly upon him.

"Just now I can't say," Herndon steadily replied, "but we were all smoking before we went to bed."

"That explains it," put in Parkman.

"You don't compliment the owners o' the shanty much," retorted a brawny miner whose name was Lynch.

"I meant no harm. But I don't understand you."

"Use yer wits an' it ain't hard ter see," Lynch returned. "Consid'rin' how the shanty was built, it'd take a heap o' skill ter set it afire with a pipe. It's my idee, gents, that that thar fire was set by some mean cuss!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE SHADOW ON THE GROUND.

ONCE more Rube bestowed a secret glance upon Parkman. The big gold-digger had expressed a decided and practical opinion. How would the man from Claim 22 take it?

A shadow crept over Parkman's face, and, unless appearances were very deceptive, the newly-advanced theory was not at all to his liking. His lips opened, but they closed again without a word.

"Thar is some sense in yer idee, Lynch," added another miner.

"I reckon so; I don't gin'rally talk nonsense. Rube Herndon, what inemy have you in Sassajack?"

"None."

"An' Gabe Dix?"

"To my knowledge, he has none."

"One on you has. That shanty was sot on fire, an' it was done out o' spite. I'd like ter see the mean cuss who did it. He's as bad as a hoss-thief, an' deserves a rope jest as much!"

A murmur went up from the honest miners. Lynch had spoken words just suited to their views. While engaged in gold-digging they were terribly in earnest—woe to the man who would stab them in the back while they were prosecuting their work.

Herndon bestowed another secret look upon Parkman. That person was manifestly ill at ease, but he raised his voice bravely.

"Your views are correct, Lynch," he declared, "but I hope, for the credit of Sassajack, that you are mistaken in your surmise."

"Who set you up fur a talker?" Lynch retorted. "I ain't b'en guessin'; I stated a fact. Do ye deny it, Mister Parkman?"

"No, no; not by any means," hastily answered the man from Claim 22.

"Because ef ye do—"

"I don't; certainly not, Lynch. It ain't for me to oppose a veteran like you."

Parkman had become alarmed at the notice drawn to him, and, seeing that Lynch's obstinacy bade fair to force him into the position as being a dissenter to the opinion of the majority, he was in a fever to extricate himself. He could have taken no better way than to refer to Lynch as a "veteran;" that pacified the big miner, and danger to Parkman drifted away for the time.

Rube saw that Yank Yellowbird was gliding quietly away. He received a glance from the mountaineer, but it was no longer the young man's intention to go to the timber.

He saw that Gabe Dix was in a mood when any words with Parkman, or Jackingham, might betray him into some rash speech, and it was clearly his duty to remain and watch over Gabe.

So Nevermiss went alone.

As usual, his skill was marked and effectual; he went unknown to any one but Rube and Gabe, and with an eye to others than those in the group by the burning shanty.

He had not forgotten the marksman in the timber, and in going to seek for him he had kept one important fact in mind. In his opinion, the marksman was probably watching the group at that moment. If he saw any one leave the group and start toward him, he would surely take alarm and get out of the way; hence, it became necessary for Yank to move secretly and unseen.

This was not hard for him.

Bringing his border-craft into play, he contrived to keep where there was always some protection, and, despite the fact that the moon was shining brightly, he reached the edge of the timber with the fixed conviction that he had not betrayed himself.

He paused by the nearest tree.

The timber was the same where Gabe Dix had

encountered Sybilla. There was a growth of large trees, but these were scattered, and there were many open spaces. At such points the moonlight fell upon the ground. Beneath the trees all was dark, and an occasional group of bushes added to this.

Yank looked sharply around.

Where was the man who had sent a bullet so close to him?

Plainly, he was near the edge of the wood, if he was near at all. Unless he had made a prompt retreat, he would wish to watch proceedings by the burning shanty.

The mountaineer stood like a statue for several moments. He had the cover of a tree under which grew numerous bushes, and was thus well concealed, but he looked around with the hope of seeing some one astir.

He was doomed to disappointment.

The wind rustled the leaves just enough to make a gentle sound, and the shadows moved a trifle, but no human form was visible.

"Thar ain't no way but ter squirm 'round an' look the atrocious insex up," thought Nevermiss, as serenely as was his custom. "I consait ef he gits sight on me he'll try his rifle ag'in, so it behooves me ter use care. Ef any shootin's ter be done, I want my share at it."

He glanced back toward the camp, and then moved along. Between himself and the next tree was a band of light, but the grass was tall enough to be of some use.

After some reconnoitering he lay down flat on the ground and drew his body, snake-like, through the sparse cover. He reached the shadow in a short time, but did not rise for several seconds. Instead, he lay and listened and watched.

At the end of his allotted period he decided that the would-be assassin was not in *that* immediate vicinity. Consequently, he moved on to the next tree, and from that to another.

As he went on without discovering traces of any human being, his faith that the marksman was on the watch gradually grew less. He felt sure that he had not overlooked any one, or frightened him away. The natural inference was that the man had run away, but Nevermiss did not relax his caution.

He looked back toward the village.

A few rods more and all signs of it would be shut out from his view by a rocky spur which thrust itself forward from the main ridge like a gigantic proboscis.

"Ef the egregious critter is about, he's close ter hand," thought Yank. "I'll look my pootiest fur awhile."

Crouching behind the trunk of a tree he watched and listened. Not a sound reached his ears to indicate that another man was near. Not a living creature could he see, look as keenly as he might.

Despite this, his attention became fixed.

Upon what?

A shadow on the ground!

A very simple thing it seemed to be, but Yank Yellowbird believed that he saw something worth looking at. The moon had gone well down the western sky, and it cast its shadows beyond the object which, intervening, helped to make them.

Beyond Yank lay the shadow of a short, branching tree. It was more open at the top than its neighbors, and very sparsely covered with leaves. Thus, the shadows of its several parts did not combine.

The shadow which had attracted his attention was peculiar. If the upper part of the tree-trunk had possessed a large protuberance, it might have cast such a shadow, but trees grow small rather than large as they approach the top. It was not likely that this tree was larger at the top than near the ground.

Yet there on the ground lay that broad shadow.

It was a curious shadow, too, for it ended abruptly in a large round object, unless the moon was playing it false.

Yank gazed at the shadow, and then up in the tree. He gained no fresh evidence there. Suddenly the shadow changed. Another smaller shadow went up to the broad top, and then the latter lost one-half its size.

The mountaineer smiled grimly. There was a man in the tree, and the variation of the shadow had been made by his taking off his hat.

"I consait I hev him," muttered Nevermiss, grimly.

Despite this belief he did not stir. His man was up the tree watching the camp. It went without saying that he was unconscious of Yank's proximity. The latter was pleased with the situation. He had the enemy at his mercy, and could afford to dally with him.

He looked back toward the camp. The lessening light of the burning shanty was visible, but, from his point of view, not the miners.

The veteran settled down to wait patiently.

Now and then the man in the tree stirred slightly. Who he was Yank did not know, and this formed food for speculation. Parkman and Jackingham were at the camp, yet here was a man interested in the matter—so much interested that he had made a shot which only chance had rendered less than murderous.

Ten minutes passed; then the man in the tree stirred more than ever.

"Comin' down!" muttered the mountaineer.

He ventured forward a little. The unknown was descending on the further side of the tree. In an instant Yank's decision was made, and he fitted like a phantom across the open space. He reached the tree, and when the unknown touched the ground only the trunk separated them.

The latter reached up and drew down a rifle, and then Yank stepped from cover. He was face to face with Steelblade, the Knife-Thrower!

It was a surprise—a serious surprise—for the swarthy-faced man. He stood like one dumfounded; even his assurance was not proof against all this.

Nevermiss leaned upon his long rifle and looked calmly at his companion.

Steelblade's face was in shadow, and it was impossible to follow his facial changes, but he would not have been the old, wily Steelblade if he had been long daunted.

He made a servile bow, and his voice sounded in accents as bland as though nothing unusual had occurred.

"A fine evening, Master Yellowbird!"

CHAPTER XVII.

NEVERMISS SAYS, "NO!"

YANK YELLOWBIRD answered with all the calmness imaginable.

"I don't remember seein' a finer evenin', Mister Steelhoss."

"My name is Steelblade, master," humbly returned the Knife-Thrower.

"'Tis, is it? I know it was suthin' o' the sort. Whar did ye steal it?"

"I don't understand, master."

"Like ez not. 'Tain't ter be expected you'd understand all obtuse figgers o' speech. Know what 'obtuse' means, don't ye?"

"Intricate and doubtful, master; but the word is abstruse."

"To be sure; so I said, an' so I meant. I'arned the word o' my cousin, who writ po'try. She was an egregious fine gal, was my cousin, an' the way she could turn off po'try was a caution. She used a team o' writin' paper ev'ry day. Writin' paper, mister, as you may not know, is divided inter inquires, fool-yous, teams an' cords, 'cordin' ter quantity—"

"Quires, reams and the like, master, I think."

"Land o' Goshen! how wise ye be!" retorted Yank, scornfully. "Arter I've told ye a thing you up an' say it over like a parrot, an' set great pride on't. Don't ye do it ag'in, ye atrocious insex, fur the blood o' the Yellowbirds is nat'rally quick an' voylent, an' thar is no knowin' what may happen ef ye git me wrothy."

"I meant no harm, master," Steelblade servilely replied.

"Then prove it by not interruptin' me when I'm engaged in family hist'ry. I was speakin' o' my cousin, the poetess. She writ Shakespeare, Milton an' other elegies, roundabouts an' posture poems, as they're called. 'Member distinctively when she asked me one day ter try my hand at it."

"Land o' Goshen! sez I, 'I can't do it,' sez I."

"A Yellowbird kin do anything," sez she."

"They use ter could," sez I; but I've got the newrol'gy an' the weak sister ter pull me back."

"You are still a Yellowbird," sez she, 'an' never was downed yet. Po'try is easy,' sez she, critikelly, 'but b'ar in mind that all rhyme ain't po'try. You must l'arn the four leadin' styles o' verse, which are any-priest, am-a-brick dextile, an' true-key. Then,' sez she, 'you want the figgers o' speech; like a-fair-sis, pedagogue, sin-coop an' the like."

"Wal, sez I, 'it sha'n't be said that a Yellowbird backed out; I'll write a poem."

"I did it, too, Steelhoss, an' it was the pootiest thing you ever read. My cousin praised it. She said that barrin' the spellin', an' a few other things, it was an egregious fine epecock. I should 'a' gone inter the business reg'lar, only I had the jumpin' newrol'gy, an' I had ter take ter the woods whar thar was room fur it ter ache."

Suddenly the mountaineer drew his tall form erect, and his voice became more incisive as he added:

"You choose an egregious queer camp, mister."

"I don't understand, master," Steelblade replied.

"I mean, the tree."

"Oh! yes, master."

"Oh! yes, nothin'!" Yank retorted; "what was ye doin' up thar?"

"I often sleep thus, Master Yellowbird."

"Steelhoss, don't lie!"

"Indeed, master, you wrong me."

"Oh! git out, ye atrocious insex. 'Tain't possible ter wrong you. How'd I go ter work ter do it? I know you, Steelhoss, as wal as though we'd b'en in college tergether."

The veteran extended his hand and touched the muzzle of the Knife-Thrower's rifle. He withdrew it, covered with a dark stain.

"Burnt powder!" he tersely commented.

"I fired at a bear, master."

"You fired at me!"

Steelblade held up his hand in humble horror.

"Oh! master, master!" he exclaimed. "You wrong me; indeed, you do."

"Not much, I don't. Come, don't attempt any o' yer theatrics. I come out hyar ter look fur the chap who shot at me, an' I found him. You are him. Pretty sort o' a varmint, you be. It's lucky fur you that you shot as poor as you did."

"Master Yellowbird, you do me the greatest injustice. I assure you I know nothing of what has occurred, nor upon what you base your groundless charges—"

"Oh, to be sure, to be sure; it ain't likely sech an innercent varmint should know. Not much, it ain't. But let me whisper one word in your ear. I've got my eyes on you, Steelhoss, an' somethin' may come of it. Sech a small thing as your shot at me don't count—I can't blame anybody fur usin' me as a target—but ef you keep on in the way you're goin', thar may be a crash—thar may, by hurley!"

Yank evinced a disposition to end the interview, but at that moment a third person appeared on the scene unexpectedly.

Some one wearing female garments suddenly glided to the dark shadow where they stood.

"What are you quarreling about, you fools!" cried a clear, scornful voice.

Yank favored the speaker with a sharp glance, and, even in the dark shadow, he recognized the woman, Sybilla.

"Hullo, we've got comp'ny, Steelhoss. One o' the fairest o' the fair," he quietly observed.

"Oh! it isn't Tubbs!" exclaimed Sybilla.

"No; 'tain't Tubbs, nor buckets, nor bowls."

"What do you mean, fool?" scornfully retorted the woman.

"What need o' explainin' ter sech a wise varmint as you be?"

"I thought I was speaking to a sensible man."

"Glad ter know yer estimate o' sech a person. You must set a store by Tecumseh Tubbs."

"What is that to you?"

"Nothin', I hope."

"I choose my associates, and I don't choose you."

"One piece o' good luck, anyhow, fur me."

Sybilla turned to Steelblade.

"Who is this fellow?"

"His name is Yank Yellowbird."

The woman started perceptibly.

"I've heard of you—you are a hunter, trapper and a scout of some notoriety. Perhaps I was too hasty in my estimate of you."

"Not an artom," Yank serenely replied.

"I am willing to be your friend."

"Takes two ter make a bargain. Don't know that I'm over an' above anxious ter take ye inter my fold. I may be wrong, an' I hope I ain't finikel, but it strikes me you are too much o' the tiger-cat order fur my taste."

"Who cares for your taste, you lauk ignoramus?" Sybilla scornfully replied.

"I hope you don't," placidly answered the mountaineer. "I'm willin' you should stick ter Steelhoss an' Tubbs. Birds o' a feather will flock tergether, an' your sort o' birds seems ter be buzzards. Settled on Sassajack fur prey, ain't ye? All right; go in; but about the time you're goin' ter pluck yer game, I may happen 'round. 'Twould be jest like me."

All this was very quietly said, but there was an undercurrent of significance which Sybilla did not fail to see. She had no words ready when a chance was given her to speak. She had heard of Yank Yellowbird before that night. His name was spoken in almost every mining-camp of the West, and it was said that he was always ready to take the part of the deservin' against evil-doers, and that, when he did so, he usually won the battle.

Knowing all this, Sybilla was troubled to find that he was already her enemy. She had tried to win his favor, and, when rebuffed, had lost her temper, and, probably, destroyed all her chances.

She resolved to make one last trial.

"Mr. Yellowbird, I am very sorry if I have offended you," she said, gently.

"Hope it won't keep ye awake o' nights," he dryly answered.

"You see, I was cross when I came here, and I spoke hastily."

"To be sure."

"I hope you won't bear ill-will, for I humbly apologize. Pray forgive me, sir."

Yank caressed his beard slowly.

"What's Tiger-Cat got on her mind?" he wondered, and then he said, aloud: "Shouldn't s'pose you'd keef fur the opinion o' an old knoc-togenarian like me."

"You are a famous man, Mr. Yellowbird."

"Be I?"

"The whole West rings with your name; even children whisper the tales of your valor by the fireside."

"Land o' Goshen! that so?"

"It is, indeed, sir. I have always wished to meet you, and the chance has come. I'm for the time located in a gulch at the upper end of the Golden Moon. Will you come there and be my guest?"

Sybilla had moved to where the light fell full upon her. She believed that she was good-look-

ing, and that no man, young or old, was blind or indifferent to such charms. She now smiled sweetly upon Yank.

"How much d'ye ask fur board?" he gravely inquired.

"It will be free, my dear sir."

"You don't say so! Should s'pose you would hev piles o' boarders at them terms."

"They are open only to you, and to you only because I regard you as a father."

"Hey? What? Land o' Goshen! you scared me—you did, by hurley! I ain't used ter havin' the female sex talk ter me that way. Wal, thank ye—thank ye kindly—but I ain't lookin' fur a darter!"

There was a dry sarcasm in his voice which made Sybilla's face flush.

"Do you, then, refuse my invitation?"

"Shall he obleeged ter do so, though I hate ter, like hurley. Ye see, I'm afflicted with newrol'gy in a voylent an' contiguous form. You might ketch it, an' that would be bad. It'd be an egregious pity ter hev you used up so yer j'int's would crack like pistol-shots when ye moved about. I consait I won't come."

Sybilla did not reply at once. She was shrewd enough to realize that Yank was beyond her reach, and that his opinion of her was a very poor one. She was angry, and she longed to free her mind by heaping abuse upon him for daring to look lightly upon her, but—she feared to do it.

The tall mountaineer would make a bad enemy, and she had good reasons for not wanting his sharp eyes directed against her in hostility.

She suddenly turned to the Knife-Thrower.

"Come, Steelblade," she said, "let us go."

"Yes, mistress."

Steelblade answered as servilely as ever, but he stole a look at Nevermiss. Would the latter consent?

Yank had nothing to say. He leaned against the tree and watched the pair quietly. Sybilla said "Good-night!" and led the way. Steelblade followed, looking back at the tall mountaineer. The former's hand was upon "Bright Eyes," and he half-expected to have occasion to defend himself.

They went unmolested, however.

"A bad lot, by hurley!" Yank muttered.

"Thar was snakes in Eden when Adam Yellowbird lived thar, an' thar are snakes in Sassajack. Parkman an' Jackingham burn houses; Mister Steelhoss is connected with them; the woman is connected with Steelhoss; an' Tecumseh Tubbs is connected with the woman. A bad lot, an' it wouldn't s'prise me ef thar was an egregious heap o' triberlation an' distress here afore long."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SHERIFF'S ERRAND.

It was noon of the following day.

Parkman and Jackingham were in their shanty, eating dinner. The entrance was suddenly darkened, and several men entered. One look in that direction was enough to startle the partners of Claim 22.

Sheriff Bradley was the leader of the party, and after him came Yank Yellowbird, Gabe Dix, Rube Herndon and two other men. To anybody that was honest this invasion would have meant nothing dangerous; but Jackingham grew pale, and even Parkman looked alarmed.

"How are you?" saluted Bradley, bluffly.

Parkman mechanically returned the greeting. "Are you done dinner?" the sheriff asked.

"No."

"Hurry up an' finish, then."

"Why?"

"You're wanted."

"Wanted?"

"So I said."

"What do you mean, sheriff?"

"Oh, you see I am hyar ter arrest you!"

"To arrest us!" echoed Jackingham, in fresh alarm.

"I see you ketch on. To arrest 'us!—jest so!"

"Good heavens! you must be joking, Bradley," said Parkman, trying to rally.

"You know better, an' so do I. I ain't a jokin' man, an' I'll try ter prove it. You're arrested fur settin' fire ter the shanty on Claim 21. It was their'n."

He waved his hand toward Rube and Gabe.

"Great heavens, man! you are mad. If this is said in jest, you have a poor way—"

"Didn't I tell you I wa'n't a joker?" shouted Bradley, angrily.

"Herndon," still persisted Parkman, "don't worry a fellow. Tell me you are not in earnest!"

"You have the sheriff's word," Rube coldly replied.

"And I am really charged with the deed?"

"Yes."

"Whoever says it is a liar!" fiercely cried Parkman. "Where is my accuser? Let him stand up and say the words to my face!"

"Don't you worry, old man," coolly returned Bradley. "You shall hev all the proof yer heart craves. Yank Yellowbird, tell what you know."

"I object to his testimony," persisted Parkman.

"Why?"

"He's prejudiced against me."

"Why is he that?"

"I don't know, but he is. He's shown all along that he is my enemy. I object to made-up testimony and the evidence of personal enemies. I demand justice!"

"I wouldn't, ef I's you," Yank answered, dryly, wholly unmoved by Parkman's groundless charges against him. "Justice is the one thing you should object ter—you should, by hurley!"

"Here is some proof of personal enmity," interrupted Parkman.

"Oh! you go along," Bradley retorted. "Yank Yellowbird is too wal knowed hyar fur you ter r'ar up like that. Ef I was him I'd punch yer head fur ye, too."

"What's the use?" the mountaineer quietly asked. "A blackguard ain't wuth noticin', while as fur these men, they're low down, anyhow. The Yellowbirds never hit a man when he's down, ef he is an atrocious insex."

"This scene need not be prolonged," said Rube Herndon, abruptly. "Suppose you come right to the point, sheriff, and have it over."

"I will," Bradley agreed. "You see, men, Yank was sharp enough ter suspect right at the start that the shanty had been set on fire, an' he looked fer the trail o' the fire-bugs. He found it, an' set out ter foller it, and it led him right ter this claim. Evidently, you an' Jackingham was on the watch, an' you rushed ter make a diversion; Yank compared your tracks with them of the fire-bugs right then an' thar, Mister Parkman, an' he found you was the critter. Then—"

"I deny it!" cried Parkman. "I deny—"

"Hold up! Hear me out. This mornin', jest after day, you an' Jackingham riz up an' obliterated all the tracks on Claim 22 that would compromise ye."

"I deny it—"

"Yellowbird, Herndon and Dix saw ye do it."

"It is false! There is a conspiracy against us. Are we to be thus unjustly branded?"

"Rubbish! Now I come ter the next item in the case. Last night you an' Jackingham made calls in the evenin', each on a young woman. Both ov ye made a matrimonial proposal; both ov ye got the mitt'n. I need sca'celly say the young women was the Rand sisters."

"I don't believe they have made such an assertion," angrily interrupted Parkman.

"Don't ye?"

"No."

"Who said they had?"

"You did—that is, I thought—"

"You had no business ter think; it's a bad habit. Don't ye tell me I lie, or I'll climb ye!"

The belligerent sheriff shook his fist at Parkman.

"I didn't say it, nor mean it," the latter declared. "But how could such an absurd report have got abroad?"

"Taint true, eh?"

"No."

"Ketched ye in a lie already. You put the report a-goin'. Tom Evans, tell what ye heard!"

One of the men who had accompanied the party to the shanty stepped forward.

"I was in the saloon of Pierre Ayot's hotel last evenin' when Parkman an' Jackingham come in. They was in bad temper, an' put down sev'ral whiskies, straight. Somebody observed that they acted as though they'd got the mitten, an' he reckoned they'd been ter ther Rand house. 'That's a fack,' put in somebody else; 'they hev, for I seen 'em go in.' At that the first man says, 'Then they've got the mitten, an' I'll bet high on it.'"

"Parkman got mad an' sort o' reckless at that. 'What of it?' says he. 'Common thing, ain't it? The gals have mittened half o' Sassajack.'"

"I know somebody they won't mitt'n," says the feller. 'They like Herndon an' Dix, an' they'll carry off the prizes, sure pop!'"

(Rube and Gabe heard these words with manifest annoyance; they had not known what was coming.)

"Upon that," continued the narrator, "Parkman got wild—I reckon the liquor had gone to his head."

"Don't you be so sure!" says he, angrily. "Herndon an' Dix ain't got 'em yit, an' they never will. Ef I can't rule, I'll ruin. Let the gals favor them curs an' I'll make it hot fur them."

"You wouldn't dar," say a miner.

"I'll fix 'em before mornin'!" shouted Parkman.

"Jest then Asa Jackingham whispered in his ear, lookin' sort o' skeered, an' Parkman shut up sudden. That's all I know."

"It's enough," declared the sheriff. "Parkman threatened to 'fix them before mornin', an' after their shanty was burnt his tracks was found thar. Oh! you're in for't, Parkman, an' thar ain't a bit o' use o' squirming. I sorter pity ye, fur the boys ain't goin' light on a man who'd burn a gold-digger's house over his head; but you've brung it on yerself."

"It is false!" cried Parkman, his face express-

ing both rage and anxiety. "This is all a plot to ruin me."

"Lightly, my man; thar is testimony enough ter fix it up all right. Not a loophole for you."

"I deny that I was on Claim 21 last night, while as for the talk at Ayot's Hotel, it is not reported straight. Whatever I did say don't count—I was drunk then."

"Some men tell more truth in their cups than out, but we won't argue. This ain't yer trial, ye see. But you'll hev ter go ter the lock-up, jest the same."

Parkman cast a malevolent glance at Rube.

"Devil seize you, I owe this to you!" he hissed.

Herndon made a slight gesture, but no oral reply.

"I suppose you'll 'jump' my claim now," Parkman added.

"Oh! you dry up!" ordered the sheriff. "I've heard enough o' yer cheap talk. Mr. Yellowbird, you be on hand when wanted, eh?"

"To be sure."

"Do ye stay with Herndon and Dix?"

"I consait so."

"Certainly, he does," Rube quickly added.

"All right; I'll know whar ter find ye. Now, men, trot away our prisoners."

It was a moment of bitter experience for Parkman and Jackingham. They fully realized the precipice upon which they stood. Unless some miracle intervened to save them, their star had set forever—worse, their lives were in danger. Twenty-four hours before they had been generally respected, and not without hopes of winning two fair women for their wives.

Now all was changed. They were charged with a crime which would not be leniently judged in Sassajack. Building materials were scarce there, and to burn a miner's shanty was as bad as to rob a plainsman of his horse.

Parkman knew this, and he knew, too, that he was in danger of being lynched. Orderly as the mountain camp was, it needed but a breeze to start a fire of lawless vengeance. There was danger of this, and even if he and Jackingham escaped it, they had forever lost their standing in Sassajack.

When they had been placed in the improvised jail—there was the first arrest in the valley of the Golden Moon—they looked at each other gravely.

"What will come of it?" Jackingham asked, with a shiver.

"I don't know."

"Do you think there is danger of—of—"

"What?"

"The lynchers!" and then the speaker grew pale as Parkman answered only with a grave shake of his head.

CHAPTER XIX.

SYBILLA.

STEELBLADE, the Knife-Thrower, like Sandy Whiskers, was a solitary miner. He had a claim well up Golden Moon Valley, and there he worked alone—when he felt like it. He seldom felt that way. His was the only rusty pick in Sassajack, but it was not strange that rust gathered upon it. Now and then it leaned against a rock for days without being lifted.

The swarthy-faced man was not addicted to labor. His claim was not a good one, and he knew it, yet he never tried to get a better one. Had he possessed such he would not have worked it. Labor he hated, and most of his time was passed in lounging about the woods—a life which just suited him.

On the afternoon of the day last referred to Steelblade was seated near the door of the wretched hut he called his home. It was only a very small framework of poles, covered with pine boughs, but as he rarely occupied it, it suited him as well as a palace.

Sitting there he suddenly found occupation for his sharp eyes, and a man and woman came toward the hut. They were Sybilla and Tecumseh Tubbs.

Steelblade arose and bowed politely as they came up.

"Give yer good-day, mistress," he observed.

"How do you do, Steelblade?"

"Quite well, mistress; thank you kindly. And how is Master Tubbs?"

"I'm wal," returned that worthy. "I'm always wal. I come from Arkansaw, whar they raise men. I'm o' a faunly half grizzly b'ar, half-catamount, an' half-rattlesnake. I kin eat ten pound o' raw beef, drink a gallon o' whisky, an' never see double nor hev a pain in the stum-mick. I kin lick a buffler bull with one hand an' play the pianny with the other."

"Are you done?" curtly asked Sybilla.

"All done, mum. Wade in an' sing yer ditty."

The man from Arkansaw crammed a huge piece of tobacco into his mouth, and contentedly sat down on the ground.

"What do you think of the news?" continued the woman, addressing Steelblade.

"What news, mistress?"

"The arrest of Parkman and Jackingham."

Steelblade lifted his brows in mild surprise.

"Are they arrested?"

"Yes."

"For what, mistress?"

"Don't you know?"

"I do not, mistress."

"Fool! you know as well as I. It is for setting fire to the cabin on Claim 21."

"Dear me, how very bad. I am sorry, for they are estimable gentlemen."

"Estimable cut-throats, like you and me, sir," Sybilla bluntly replied. "Don't let us mince words. I don't like your habit of doing it; everybody knows that you are a first-class scoundrel, to whom a man's life is no more than a breath of air, yet you go around playing the canting hypocrite. Drop it. Act your nature with me."

Steelblade put up both hands in mild remonstrance.

"You wrong me, mistress—you do, indeed; but I will not dispute a lady. Pray say what you wish, dear mistress."

"Drop that! Don't 'dear me'! I won't have it. And now to business. We were speaking of Parkman and Jackingham. They are in serious trouble."

"I am afraid so."

"Accused of firing the shanty on Claim 21, they are under the blackest of bans. The miners of Sassajack won't see such a thing done without making a big kick. Knowing this, I have sent Tecumseh Tubbs around to listen to the talk of the men as they work on their claims."

"I am T. Tubbs," interpolated the man from Arkansaw, "an' I'm half griz—"

"Silence, fool!" commanded Sybilla. "What he heard confirms my first suspicions. There is danger afoot for the accused men, and threats of violence have been made. It only needs a little brisker breeze to start a devouring flame, and that breeze will come when the men get together after their work is done. Somebody will say, 'They ought to be lynched!' and that will be the breeze. Woe unto Parkman and Jackingham then!"

Steelblade changed his position uneasily.

"Bad for them, mistress," he agreed.

"Are we going to allow it?"

"What can we do?"

"Rescue them."

"And get ourselves into trouble?"

"Fool! do you suppose I would give the tigers of Sassajack any hold upon me? I am not a woman if I would allow myself to be outwitted—detected—by them."

"We run a risk, mistress."

"You, an old adventurerer, talks of that!"

"Parkman and Jackingham should have taken care of themselves. Besides, why should we feel interested in them?"

"My reason is nothing to you. Your reason—well, did they set fire to the shanty?"

Sybilla fixed a piercing regard upon the Knife-Thrower, but his gaze did not waver.

"I cannot believe them guilty of it, mistress."

The woman laughed shortly.

"Nor I, Sir Cut-throat. They were knowing to it, I dare say, but I don't believe they applied the match. I won't say who did—it might raise a blush to your innocent cheek, Steelblade. Come, we fully understand each other. Whether you are willing to see the men lynched is of no consequence, speaking from a moral point of view; but the fact that they and you have been allies for a space shows you that they may be useful to you in the future. Don't let the goose that lays the golden egg be prematurely killed."

"Pardon me, mistress, but it is plain that you want them saved because they may be useful to you."

"What of it?"

"Do you deny it, mistress?"

"No."

"I thought not."

"How wise! You fool, do you take me for a philanthropist, or whatever you see fit to call it, who would risk her neck for anything not likely to be useful to her? As far as humanity is concerned, I had just as soon see them hung, but I am capable of running some risk for my own sake."

Steelblade made no reply.

"Come. I want you for an ally. I have Tecumseh Tubbs, yonder, but he is only useful as far as his brute strength goes; his head is a fool-head."

"Two-of-a-kind!" growled Tubbs, in an undertone.

"You, Steelblade, are sharp, clear-headed and wily. I want your aid—and that of yonder murderous toy."

She pointed to the ugly-looking knife, and Steelblade at once drew it from his belt.

"Great is 'Bright Eyes!'" he softly said, as he pressed his lips to the glistening blade.

"Look you, mistress, there is not another like her in the world. Behold yonder flower, mistress, which is near its death."

He flung the knife in a direct line, and the nodding head of the flower fell several feet away, cleanly severed from its decapitated trunk.

"Spare us your witchcraft," ordered Sybilla, as he ran quickly and recovered the knife; and he thrust "Bright Eyes" back into his belt after imprinting another kiss upon the blade.

The swarthy-faced man drew his form erect.

"Mistress, command me!" he returned.
 "I command you to help me."
 "I will obey."
 "Parkman and Jackingham must be rescued."
 "It is well."
 "To-night."
 "It is well."
 "You see yonder pine, on the nose of the ridge?"

"Yes."
 "Meet us there at nine o'clock."
 "It shall be done, mistress."
 "That is all I have to say now. I will return to my good friend, Sandy Whiskers. He will not be one of our party; he is a full-fledged fool, and such men are not to be trusted. Come, brute, let us go!"

She whistled to Tecumseh Tubbs as though he were a dog, and the big man cheerfully arose.

"I like pet names," he observed. "Was always used ter 'em down in Arkansaw. I kin serve a pooty woman ef she does call me 'brute,' 'fool,' an' the like. Better a blow from a pooty woman than a purse from a king."

"Master Tubbs has turned poet," blandly observed Steelblade; but if any one heard the words they passed unheeded—Sybilla was moving away, and the man from Arkansaw followed like an obedient dog.

Steelblade watched them out of sight, and then the lids of his eyes crept toward the pupils until the latter were ambushed in a wonderful way; they were as secret, skulking and weird as Steelblade, himself.

Profoundly thoughtful was the Knife-Thrower, but he instinctively caressed "Bright Eyes" as he meditated. And this meditation ran thus:

"She thinks to make me her cat's-paw, does Mistress Sybilla; she would work upon my fears to force me to aid her. Well, well, well, mistress, I am your slave—as long as it is to my interests, I do not fully understand you. Let our paths run parallel until I see my way clear. I like you. Satan would not have been so dreadful a foe if he had had a mate like Mistress Sybilla. She is like him, and I am like both. Awhile longer I will delay the work which brought me to Sassa-jack—and I suspect that when I do it, I shall help her as much as myself."

He wafted a kiss after the woman.
 "Beautiful one!" he murmured; "I love you next to 'Bright Eyes.'"

CHAPTER XX.

GATHERING DANGER.

"THE hour is at hand!"

Sybilla spoke the words. Accompanied by Tecumseh Tubbs and Steelblade, she had come into the village after the meeting by the pine on the nose of the ridge. The trio were armed to the teeth, in the full sense of the word. Steelblade and Tubbs bristled with weapons, and Sybilla carried two revolvers and a knife.

It was a desperate errand they were upon, but she was more than ever convinced that only prompt action would save the lives of Parkman and Jackingham. As she had prophesied, the miners began to gather and talk over the case when their day's work was done, and the lynch-law spirit at once became manifest.

All this Sybilla personally observed, and she spurred her followers on. For the prisoners she cared nothing, except to make them useful to her in the future. Their lives were no more than a bubble; their services were much.

The sky was clouded that night, though not enough to suit her. There was a moon behind those clouds which toned down the darkness; she would have preferred it intensely dark.

The trio reached a point near the temporary jail, and Sybilla uttered the words before recorded.

"Not so fast, mistress," replied Steelblade, in a soft tone. "There are men about the jail."
 "Can it be that fool of a sheriff has set a guard?"

"He would be a fool not to. He must show the spirit that is rife among the men."

"Why didn't I think of that before?" angrily muttered the woman.

"What ef they be thar?" asked Tubbs, anxious to shine in the case. "Go forward, an' knock Bradley an' his tools on the head—"

"Silence, blockhead! You are to act, not think," peremptorily returned Sybilla.

Tubbs subsided with an angry growl.

At that moment the sheriff and one of his men began a circuit of the building. They paused near Sybilla and her party.

"All quiet," said the subaltern.

"So far, yes; but I wish the night was wail past. I feel skeery, by thunder!"

"Thar may be no trouble."

Bradley shook his head.

"Don't know ez I blame 'em much."

"Nor me. Ef I wa'n't sheriff, I'd be the fu'st ter call fur a rope. Wish I'd resigned 'fore now. Hyar I've been sheriff six months, an' never had a job until this one; an' now I've got it, I sw'ar I don't feel happy."

"Throw up the job an' let the boys rope them

two incendiary skunks," suggested the subordinate.

"Not much. I'm sheriff, an' I won't take water. I tol' ye so when I gathered my gang ter defend the jail. Them are mean cut-throats inside, but I represent the law, an' I'll stan' by it. I'd shoot the fu'st man who tried ter take my prisoners away, even ef that man was my own brother!"

The speaker closed his jaws with a vicious snap, and then moved on with his assistant.

"No easy job for us, mistress," observed Steelblade, softly.

"No; but we must do it."

"How?"

"Don't ask me 'how!'" was the irritable reply. "It must be done, and that settles it. Steelblade you are as lithe and nimble as a snake—can't you creep forward, reach the window, enter and free Parkman and Jackingham?"

The Knife-Thrower pointed to the guards.

"What of them?" he asked.

"My curse upon them!"

"They would see and shoot whoever tried it."

"Then how are we to do it?"

She spoke almost with an accent of despair. She had not expected to find guards all about, as they were, and for once her cunning seemed of no avail. At any moment the lynchers might come, and then it would be impossible to wrest the prisoners from their hands.

And the lynchers?

Down in Pierre Ayot's saloon they had gathered as if by common understanding. It was not a general evening resort. Some strange chance had made Sassa-jack unusually temperate as Western towns go. It was doubtful if there was a man in the place so stiff-necked and finical that he never drank liquor, but there were no sots. Sensible men were the men of Sassa-jack; when they drank it was with moderation.

On this occasion something else was on their minds.

They were talking of Parkman and Jackingham.

"This is the fu'st slip-up in town," said one; "le's give the lawless element a lesson right at the start, an' check 'em."

"Better let the law take its course," said a conscientious little miner.

"What law is thar in the Golden Moon Valley? No judge, no jury, no court-house—only a sheriff. Sech things we don't want. We are law enough, I reckon, ter run this burg."

"That's the talk," put in a red-bearded man.

"This is a gov'ment o' the people."

"The long an' short on't is, we can't hev no house-burners hyar. Next thing it will be gold-stealin', I reckon. Nip it in the bud."

"Them is my sentiments."

"Who's in favor o' raidin' the jail?"

A hoarse murmur of voices answered.

"All who will j'ine the party, hold up hands!"

Nearly every hand was raised.

"Somebody git a rope."

A big miner flung up his hands, and a rope spun out from its coil and fell, snake-like, upon the heads of a dozen men.

A subdued cheer went up; the means were at hand, and there need be no further delay.

"On to the jail!"

The word was given, and the crowd began to surge out of the saloon. Only two hundred yards separated them from the prisoners, and they were hot for mischief.

And the prisoners?

In the jail, left in total darkness, Parkman and Jackingham were left alone. They were not ignorant of what was going on outside. They had been hooted at; they had seen, before night fell, the groups of men who had gesticulated toward the jail; they had seen Bradley double his guard.

They knew that their lives were in danger.

Parkman paced the floor nervously. He was troubled, but far from being crushed. He was resolved to defend himself to the last if the lynchers came. He was not bound, and if, as he had planned to do, he could wrest a weapon away from some lyncher, he might make their work more deadly to them than they expected.

Jackingham lacked this bravery. He was crushed, and he crouched in one corner, pale and trembling, and listened to every sound with fear that was a coward's fear.

"Curse the hour we ever came here!" he groaned.

"It was unlucky," Parkman admitted.

"We have been blind fools."

"Can't be helped now."

"Helped! The lynchers will have us in a short time."

"I'm afraid so."

"Great heavens! how can you speak so?"

"Speak how?"

"So coldly—so indifferently. We are young and life is precious; it is horrible to have it wrested away thus—"

"Come, come; have done with whining!" savagely interrupted Parkman. "We can die, I suppose, but let it be like men. Brace up! Don't let the dogs see you waver in the least. Show a bold front."

It was not in Jackingham's nature to show a bold front under such circumstances, and he

was about to admit it freely when the door opened and Sheriff Bradley appeared.

"Men," he said, bluffly, "I think it only fair to let you know that thar is a devil of a time just ahead. The ruiners have met an' passed a resolute that the law b'longs in their hands, an' they mean ter tackle the jail, take you out, an' hang ye. Of course we shall fight 'em to the last, but I'm afeard it'll go ag'in' us."

Jackingham cowered back further in the corner, but Parkman spoke fiercely:

"I ask no favors of the scoundrels if you will fix me out. Give me weapons, and I will show them that they can't ride over me easily."

"Can't be done, Parkman."

"Why not?"

"Who ever beerd o' sech a thing as armin' prisoners, an' lettin' 'em loose ter fight?"

"Are we, then, to be butchered in cold blood?"

"We'll defend ye ef we can."

"But you say the chances are against you."

"They be."

"Then give me two revolvers and a knife, and let me die like a man!"

"Can't do it. I'm reelly sorry, fur I like yer pluck, but it's ag'in all rules an' precedents. Keep up yer courage, fur we'll save yer ef we kin; but give ye arms, I can't an' won't."

He turned to go, but Parkman bitterly continued:

"I suppose Herndon and Dick lead the lynch-

ers?"
 "They ain't even along with them. Herndon an' Dix are men who have prejudices, an' they would stan' up an' oppose Jedge Lynch rather than help him. The boys hev carefully kep' their intentions from Rube an' Gabe. I've got 'rangements made ter call them ter help me ef the wu'st reelly comes. They are now restin' quiet in the new shanty they bought ter-day."

"Bradley, one word."

"Wal?"

"Give me chance to die like a man. Give me weapons, and let me—"

"Can't do it, posserbly. It's ag'in' all rules."

The sheriff went out hastily, while Parkman went to the single window and savagely shook the strong, wooden bars which made it impassable.

"Curse the luck!" he hissed, "this is hard. We are like cornered rats, and not a thing will they give us in the way of self-defense. We are utterly helpless, but it may not be so in the end. If I can get hold of a revolver when the lynchers come, there will be more dead men than the rope calls for!"

Bradley reached the outside just in time to receive word that the lynchers were starting from Ayot's. He posted his men, and then waited with extreme anxiety. Every gaze was turned toward the east—toward Ayot's—and every moment they expected to see the mob appear in the darkness.

Minutes wore away, but the lynchers did not come. What did it mean? Longer they waited, and the suspense partook of wonder.

Bradley sent out another messenger. He returned after a few minutes and reported that the lynchers had quietly dispersed and gone to their homes—why, he had not been able to learn.

Filled with great wonder, the sheriff went again to the prison-room. There fresh surprise awaited him.—the place was vacant. The door was locked and the window barred as he had left them, but Parkman and Jackingham were gone.

It seemed like the work of witchcraft.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE LONE MINER'S STORY.

THE sheriff rushed to the window and shook the bars. They were as firm as ever, and did not seem to have been tampered with. He hastened back to the outer room where the so-called jailer was on duty.

"Briggs, who has passed hyar?" he demanded.

"Nobody."

"Be you sure?"

"Certain I be."

"Hev you stayed right at your post?"

"Yes."

"An' nobody has passed in or out?"

"Not a soul."

Bradley stood dumfounded. He had the best of reasons for believing these statements, for he had the only key to the door, and it had certainly been locked when he came back. Yet, it was absurd to suppose that the prisoners had vanished into air; they had gone in some way which would be plain enough if explained.

He took a lamp and went into the prison room. First of all he made an optical investigation, which revealed nothing; then he examined the walls and floor, and met with no more success.

It was strange and perplexing, but one fact was clear—they were gone, and it was his duty to find them.

He summoned his men again and told them what had occurred, stating that he was sure the escaped men had not gone without aid. Possibly the lynchers had got them, after all, in which case they could not move too promptly.

His address was short, and then he hurried away with his force to hunt up the missing men.

The lynchers had not secured Parkman and Jackingham, and they were ignorant of the escape.

These excited men had been turned from their purpose by a combination of events which began when they started to leave Pierre Ayot's saloon and make the descent upon the jail.

The foremost of the party suddenly found themselves confronted by a man who stood squarely in their path, though in a way imploring, rather than aggressive.

"Gentlemen," he at once said, "I beg that you will let me say a word to you."

The speaker was Sandy Whiskers, the lone miner.

"Hullo!—got a new recruit, hev we?"

"No, no; I don't want ter go with you, an' I don't want you ter go. Parkman an' Jackingham didn't set fire ter the shanty. They wa'n't the men."

"The blazes they wa'n't!"

"I assure you they were not."

"What new freak is this, Sandy Whiskers? I thought you didn't like Parkman."

"I don't."

"Then why do you speak fur him?"

"Justice demands it. Parkman is a bad man, but I know 'twan't him who set fire ter the shanty, an' it is my duty ter say so."

"You're awfully stuck on 'duty,' ain't ye?"

"I'm a wicked, sinful man," Sandy Whiskers humbly replied; "but I am tryin' to atone fur what I hev done in the past. It cost me a long battle with myself ter make up my mind ter speak fur Parkman, for I didn't like him, but I am goin' ter do it."

His earnest, sober manner impressed a good many of the miners, but, as usual, there were some who were not ready to listen to reason in any form.

"Oh! drop it!" cried one. "What be we hangin' 'round ter talk with this old blockhead fur?"

"A crazy man, too."

"Or a friend o' Parkman's."

"He ain't that, an' you know it," sharply retorted one of the cooler-headed men. "I say, listen to him."

"That's horse sense—hear him, anyhow."

"Sandy Whiskers, kin you prove what ye say?"

"I can, gentlemen."

"Then speak out."

"Parkman an' Jackingham was up in a gulch half-way ter my cabin when the fire began. I watched 'em at least half an hour, fur—"

"Why did you watch 'em?"

"I thought they might be a-comin' ter molest me."

"Wal, did ye find out why they was thar?"

"No; I couldn't get nigh enough ter hear what they said; though I had an idee they was thar ter meet somebody. Nobody come, an' they finally left. I was whar I could see the hull village, an' I declare it was when they had gone about five rod that the fu'st light showed from the burnin' shanty. They couldn't 'a' set it."

More of the miners had been convinced, but there were still some doubters.

"They may hev set it afore they went up in the gulch," suggested one.

"I'll swar I set an' watched 'em half an hour, an' the blaze showed right after."

"I b'lieve you're lyin'."

"I'm tellin' the solemn truth."

"Ef so, you're a deep one. Arter the row with Parkman, at the hotel, you wouldn't speak for him now unless it was a put-up job."

"I tell you, gentlemen," patiently explained Sandy Whiskers, "it was a long, hard battle with myself before I could force myself ter speak out. I didn't like him, an' it was only duty made me speak."

"What an angel you be!" was the bitter sneer.

"I am a weak, sinful man, but I am tryin' ter do my duty now."

"I b'lieve ye, Sandy Whiskers, an' you ain't goin' ter be badgered no more. Gents, we can't go ag'in' this testimony with a rush. We must take time ter think it over. The pris'ners will keep, so don't let us act while our blood is hot. I move we adjourn fur twenty-four hours, an' think it over calmly ter-morrer. By night we kin decide the matter, an' then act in a cool-headed way."

There were opponents of this plan, but the upholders were in the majority. The matter was duly discussed, the more mercifully-inclined argued their case well, and in the course of a few minutes victory was theirs.

It was decided to defer action for at least one day.

This matter settled, they separated and went to their various homes, and for a while there was quiet in Sassajack. Then came another sensation.

Parkman and Jackingham had escaped.

Such was the story told by Sheriff Bradley and his men, who were seeking for the run-aways, and the officers of law seemed decidedly in earnest.

As usual, there were unbelievers. One faction expressed a belief that Bradley had slyly removed the men to foil the lynchers, while another found fresh grounds for complaint against Sandy Whiskers.

The latter had left the village at once, and there were many who believed that he had been playing a deep game, and had now run away from the Golden Moon Valley. These men did not take the trouble to go to the lone miner's shanty and see if he was there; they condemned him without the least evidence. Some even went so far as to suggest that the lynchers visit him, but this disgrace was that night spared Sassajack.

Afterward—

What occurred afterward will be related in due order.

Herndon, Dix and Yank Yellowbird heard of the escape. It was their first intimation that anything was wrong about the village. During the evening they had been in their new shanty, and Yank had been so unusually beset with a mania for telling stories that time had passed quickly; while, before dark, the would-be lynchers had used every effort to keep them ignorant.

This effort might have been fruitless, only that not one of the three men left Claim 21 after noon.

Thus, Yank Yellowbird's perspicacity was not brought to bear upon the slight signs they could not have concealed.

Mention has been made of their new shanty. This they bought outright of a miner who that day received news that caused him to suddenly leave Sassajack.

They bought his shanty, moved it to Claim 21, and put it up near the ruins of their old structure.

They left the shanty after the news came and stood outside on the claim, but did not join in the hunt for the escaped prisoners.

Claim 22 lay silent and deserted just above their own. No light shone from the door; no sound of voices broke the stillness which hung over it somberly and, it almost seemed, threateningly.

The men who had dug gold there—who had been their neighbors—were gone; gone as outcasts and fugitives.

"But we haven't seen the last of them," observed Rube, mechanically following his train of thought.

"I consait not," Yank agreed.

"They have lost their hopes of getting rich, their reputation, their freedom of action—"

"An' the women they sot a store by."

"True. And for all this, be sure they will blame us."

"I ain't a doubt on't."

"We haven't seen the last of them."

"What d'ye expect, Reuben?"

"Some blow from them. Claim 22 was a promising bit of soil—very promising for the humble, old-fashioned way we mine here at Sassajack—and they will be wild with rage."

"What d'ye think of Sandy Whiskers's story?"

"I doubt it."

"I b'lieve it."

"You do? Why?"

"Sounds reasonable, an' I hev faith in Sandy."

Gabe Dix made an impatient gesture.

"Don't be skepterkel, Rocky Mountain Samson," good-humoredly added Nevermiss. "Thar ain't no doubt but Parkman an' his crony was in the plot ter burn your hut, but I consait it was another man who set the fire. Thar is a pretty mean comb'nation o' atrocious insex hyarabouts, an', as you say, it's very likely they will strike a fresh blow at ye. Look out fur them. Thar is some brains in the clique, I consait, an' an egregious heap o' mischief. I'm afeerd thar is goin' ter be right up-an'-down unpleasant times soon!"

CHAPTER XXII.

THE GULCH MINER.

ANOTHER day dawned, and Sassajack had a sensation the like of which it had never before been affiliated with. The owners of Claim 21 heard the news just as they were about to resume work. Yank Yellowbird had wandered away with his long rifle over his shoulder, and Gabe and Rube had taken their picks when they saw a man hurrying toward the shanty.

His name was Ambrose Ellis, and it was at his house that Isabel and Ruth Rand lived.

He was generally supposed to be the uncle of the girls, but Herndon and Dix knew that such was not the fact.

Some years before the girls went to board at his house, when he lived in Iowa. Between them and Mr. and Mrs. Ellis a strong friendship sprang up, and it was because of that that they remained in the family and called the old folks "uncle" and "aunt."

They came to Sassajack with Ellis and his wife, and nearly every one supposed that they were their nieces, a simple error which was allowed to go undisputed, because such a tie existed in affection, if not by relationship.

When the old man was seen hastening toward the shanty, both Rube and Gabe paused.

"I'm afraid something is wrong!" exclaimed the latter.

"He may be coming on business only."

Rube answered hopefully, but was so far from feeling confident that he started to meet Ellis. As the latter drew nearer it was to be seen that his face was pale and agitated.

"What is it?" Rube quickly asked.

"The girls!"

Ellis gasped, rather than spoke, the words, and seemed to be wholly out of breath.

"What of them?" the young miner demanded.

Ellis tried to speak, but no words passed his ashen-hued lips.

Rube grasped his arm.

"Speak quickly! Are they ill?"

"They—they are gone!"

"Gone!"

"Yes."

"Where? How? Why?" impetuously cried Gabe.

"Stolen by those villains!" groaned Ellis, who was regaining his breath.

"What villains? Do you mean—"

"Parkman and Jackingham!"

The truth was out, and the young miners were speechless in turn. But Ellis went on feverishly:

"They came to the house last night, overpowered and bound my wife and me, and then took the girls away. We lay there all night, unable to give an alarm—we were gagged—but this morning we managed to attract attention. Oh! what will become of my poor children? I would as soon trust them with wolves as with Parkman and Jackingham. I always said that they were evil men, and they proved it by burning your shanty. Oh! why didn't the lynchers do their work last night?"

Rube Herndon had finally reached his presence of mind.

"Are you sure your assailants were Parkman and Jackingham? Did you see them clearly?"

"Yes."

"Did they give you a clew to their intentions?"

"They did not say a word to us; they worked in absolute silence. They pounced upon us, and left us bound. We did not see them take Isabel and Ruth away, but, of course, it was their work."

"Were they alone?" asked Gladiator Gabe, hoarsely.

"No; there were others."

"Who?"

"We recognized no one else."

"Was there a woman among them?"

"I didn't see any."

Rube glanced at Gabe sharply. He suspected what was in the young Samson's mind.

"Our duty is clear," Herndon continued.

"Isabel and Ruth have been abducted, and are, no doubt, miles away, now. There is one man here pre-eminently fitted to hunt them down—Yank Yellowbird. Of course Gabe and I will go to the rescue at once, but it needs Yank's great skill as a borderer to follow a trail which may be rendered obscure by repeated devices. Have you given a general alarm, Mr. Ellis?"

"I think it has spread by now—yes; see the miners gathering. Heaven bless them!—their hearts are of gold, and they will do their best for my poor children."

The old man spoke in a tremulous voice, but that of Herndon rung out sharply, clearly.

"Gabe, let us be off and find Yank Yellowbird. The sooner we get him to work, the better. Mr. Ellis, go to the miners, but do nothing until I reappear with Yank."

It was settled that way, and the young men hastened away. Looking back as they ascended the ridge they saw the miners buzzing about like angry hornets. This last outrage had stirred them to the quick. Every one liked the Rand sisters, and the fact that Parkman and Jackingham were the offenders was enough to drive them almost mad with anger. Only the night before they had been within an ace of lynching the men; they were sorry now that they had not done so.

Where no regular form of law exists, even honest men favor the ways of Judge Lynch at times.

So the men of Sassajack were clamorous for the lives of the offenders, and work, for once, was entirely suspended in Golden Moon Valley. They congregated in groups, and wrath burned at fever heat.

In the mean while Gabe and Rube had gone on rapidly. Once clear of the vicinity of the camp they separated, in order to increase their chances of finding Yank quickly, and each went as he saw fit.

Rocky Mountain Samson's course was almost as direct as a mathematical line. Only the nature of the ground caused him to make any deviation.

Thus he went on until he reached a gulch well up the valley. A single cabin stood within it. Gabe strode on, his eyes gleaming fiercely; he reached the shanty; he passed inside. Then followed a tableau.

The shanty was that of Sandy Whiskers, and he had been seated inside when Gabe unceremoniously entered. He sprang to his feet then, and the men stood facing each other. The lone miner was troubled, uncertain and rather

startled, but, humble as ever; Gladiator Gabe was pale, fierce and aggressive.

He paused only a moment. Striding forward, he grasped Sandy Whiskers's arm in a bold almost crushing in its force.

"Villain!" he almost shouted, "what have you done with her?"

Sandy Whiskers's face grew pale and startled. He tried to speak, stammered pitifully, and only found voice after a desperate effort.

"I don't know," he gasped.

"Liar! You know where she is."

"No, no, I do not. She went away."

"I suppose you would have me believe she went willingly."

"Indeed, she did, sir."

"It is false!"

"Sir, I beg that you will believe me. I did not know she was a friend of yours, an' I never asked no questions where she went. I had no interest in her."

The Rocky Mountain Samson shook the lone miner as though he had been a child.

"Why will you tell such a lie?" he thundered. "No interest in her? Then why did you make such a disturbance at the hotel about her?"

Sandy Whiskers's expression changed.

"Who be you talkin' about?" he asked.

"Whom do you suppose?"

"I—I thought you meant Sybilla."

"Sybilla!" fiercely repeated Gabe. "Scoundrel, how dare you utter her name?"

"Who do ye mean, then?" almost wailed the lone miner.

"Isabel Rand and her sister!"

An awful fear suddenly settled upon Sandy Whiskers's face. He clutched at Gabe's arm in turn, and his grasp was that of a vise. His broad face worked convulsively.

"What o' them?" he gasped.

"They are gone—abducted—stolen—"

Sandy Whiskers beat his breast wildly.

"Who by—who by?" he hoarsely demanded.

"Parkman and—"

The lone miner threw up his arms with an awful cry.

"Merciful Heaven!" he frantically cried, "they are doomed—doomed!"

And he fell to the ground and lay there, writhing convulsively, tearing at his garments and uttering a loud, moaning sound like that of a wild animal in pain, while his face was distorted in a way terrible to behold.

Gladiator Gabe stood like one turned to stone. Never before had he seen a sight like that—never had he seen anything which so filled him with wonder, horror and awe. This uncontrolled emotion of the strange man was beyond his powers of conception, and too violent to admit of the theory that it was feigned.

He half-expected to see Sandy Whiskers die before his eyes, and he awaited without motion—the scene was too strange and weird for him to think of rendering aid, but it may be said that his mind was not so filled with bitterness as when he came there.

Then he had felt sure that Sandy Whiskers had been an accomplice of Parkman and Jackingham, and that he was about to face a man who could tell, if he would, where the missing girls were.

Now he was confused and uncertain.

The emotion shown by the lone miner seemed like an echo of his own heart-pain, placed beyond restriction.

Several moments passed, and Sandy Whiskers gradually grew calmer. Then he arose. His face had assumed a sort of composure, but it was startlingly pale, and his eyes were wild and glassy. He looked at Gabe in a strange way, and hoarsely whispered:

"A rifle!—give me a rifle!"

And he reached toward the weapon in Gladiator Gabe's hands.

CHAPTER XXIII.

ON THE TRAIL.

GABE put the weapon behind him.

"What do you want of a rifle?" he asked.

"I'm goin' in pursuit."

"Of Jackingham and Parkman?"

"Yes."

"Where will you go?"

"I don't know, but I'll find them somewhar. The world is not wide enough ter hide them from my view. I'll hev 'em. May I take the rifle?"

"Why not take your own?"

"I haven't got any."

"Are you really ignorant of where the abductors would be likely to go?"

"Yes."

"You spoke for them last night."

"Duty demanded it."

"You have had a woman and man here."

"Yes; Sybilla an' her man. Is thar aught ag'in' them?" anxiously asked the lone miner.

"Do you believe them worthy people?"

"I don't know. They come hyar an' asked leave ter stay, offerin' me money. I didn't know nothin' ag'in' them, an' I took them in. Ef they are evil folks, I'm sorry."

"Have they left here?"

"I don't know. They went away in the evenin', last night, an' I ain't seen 'em sence."

"I don't think you will. One question more.

What is this interest you claim to feel in Isabel and Ruth Rand?"

A startled expression appeared on the miner's face.

"I—I don't understand," he stammered.

"You do understand," replied Gladiator Gabe, though without harshness; in spite of himself he was learning to have a better opinion of Sandy Whiskers. "Come, my man, speak out!"

"I think they are fine gals," muttered the older man.

"That won't do."

"Why do ye ask?" Sandy Whiskers suddenly burst out, almost fiercely. "I wouldn't do 'em harm fur all the world; I'd die for 'em!"

"Why?"

The lone miner did not answer. He shifted his position in the old, uneasy manner, and his wandering gaze seemed to rest upon everything but Gabe's face.

"They are strangers to you, are they not?" pursued Gabe, steadily.

"Yes—no."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I don't know."

Sandy Whiskers spoke almost imploringly, as though to beseech mercy; but suddenly aroused, and a look of desperate firmness appeared on his face.

"Why do we stan' here idle?" he added. "Ev'ry minute is precious—we must git away on the trail. I am goin'—don't stop me!"

He turned and rushed from the shanty with headlong speed, and as Gabe followed to the door, he saw him bounding away down the gulch.

"Incomprehensible riddle!" the young miner muttered, "I shall have to give you up for now. Your vagaries are past my understanding, and there is more important work for me to do."

He ascended an elevated point where he could obtain a good view. Looking back at the village he saw the miners there, and still in a state of excitement. He saw more. Even from that distance he could distinguish Rube Herndon and Yank Yellowbird.

Breathing a sigh of relief, he hastened back to the village.

He found a rescue-party nearly ready to start. It was to be composed, besides himself, of Yank, Rube, Sheriff Bradley and Pierre Ayot. A second party was also to go, in charge of Ellis and a veteran miner named Corliss, but with that he had little interest.

As there were only eleven horses in Sassajack, the numbers of the parties were limited.

Yank Yellowbird was the ruling spirit then, and he let no time go to waste. His party was soon ready to start, and they rode from the village. The first step of the abductors was already known. Four horses were missing, and Yank had found their trail.

Leaving the camp, they had started due north.

Yank, mounted upon a horse as bony and lean as himself—it was his own property—went to the head and the start was made.

"Bear up, all on ye," said the mountaineer, cheerfully. "It won't do an artom o' good ter be downcast, an' thar ain't no need on't. I consait we shall win, an' hime-by we shall laugh at our triberlations an' distresses."

"I hope so," the sheriff doubtfully answered.

"This 'casion reminds me o' the time when I used ter go courtin'," pursued Yank. "I was powerfully in love with one Matilda Short, as pooty a gal as you could find, high or low, but in them days I was young an' bashful, an' I didn't git erlong fast. 'Bout all I did was ter look at her an' sigh. I rattled out all my front teeth a-sighin', the force o' the sigh was so tremenjous; an' I fell away amazin' in flesh."

"This won't do," sez my mother.

"I'm afeerd not," sez I.

"Why don't ye brace up an' make love ter the gal?" sez she.

"I dassent," sez I; 'the weak sister is afeerd o' gals, an' I consait I be, too. Besides, the minute I git sight o' Matilda the newrol'gy begins ter jump egregious."

"Young man," sez my mother, 'this is on-worthy a Yellowbird, an' I won't hev it. Now you go right off an' see Matilda. Call on her this hour!"

"Upon that my knees begun ter thump ag'in' each other, an' the newrol'gy give me an atrocious pain."

"I ain't got no excuse," sez I.

"I'll make one," sez she. 'Matilda always answers a knock at the door—now you go over thar an' tell 'em your marm wants ter borry a mouse-trap.'

"It was rayther a brilliant idee, but my left foot was in an awful state o' revolt, an' it needed a heap o' urg'in' ter make me go. As usual, though, my marm carried the day, an' over I went. Matilda came ter the door, an' I tol' her we wanted the mouse-trap, bad. Her mouth kinder puckered around the corners, as though she felt like laughin', but she axed me an' said she'd git the trap; but she didn't start right off, an' we sorter fell inter conversation erbout Parson Jimson's last sermon, an' Deacon Nye's brindled cow, as folks will in the country. All o' a sudden, hows'ever, the kitchen door opened an' Matilda's mother 'peared. The old lady at once fixed a stony glare upon me.

"Young man, what're ye hangin' 'round hyar fur?" sez she.

"I—I called," sez I, stammerin', an' then I stopped.

"What do ye want?" sez she, in an awful voice.

"My marm sent me ter borry a mouse-trap," sez I, almost groanin' with the newrol'gy pain.

"The old lady smiled sarcastic.

"You go home," sez she, 'an' tell your mother that I ain't no objections ter loanin' the mouse-trap, but,' sez she, p'intin' her finger at Matilda, 'I'll be hanged ef I am goin' ter furnish the mouse, too!"

"With that she opened the outside door.

"You had better go home," sez she, 'fur no Yellowbird is good enough bait ter ketch a mouse in my house."

"Natrally, her slurs ag'in' the Yellowbirds stirred me up, an' I left the house in high wrath, while as I went I heard them women a-snickerin'—I did, by hurley. I never went courtin' Matilda ag'in, but I got square with 'em. A few days after their white heifer fell inter the well, an' they sent fur me ter git her out. I didn't go, but sent word that ef they baited the mouse-trap wal, an' set it nigh the well, the heifer would prob'ly come up herself. The varmint drowned, an' the Yellowbirds an' Shorts sorter shunned each other arter that."

Yank related this reminiscence in his own peculiar way, and his genial humor of utterance—that quality which cannot be described, but which is all-powerful—did a good deal to lessen the prevailing gloom.

While he talked he watched the way ahead. Thus far it was easy to follow the trail. No attempt had been made to hide it, and they were able to ride as fast as the rough ground would allow.

It was a matter of somespeculation how many persons were in the abductors' party. The tracks of four horses were to be seen, which seemed to indicate that Parkman, Jackingham, Isabel and Ruth constituted the party, but it had been observed that Sybilla, Tecumseh Tubbs and Steelblade were missing.

There was nothing to connect them positively with the party, but Ellis and his wife had said that there were other men with Parkman and Jackingham when Ruth and Isabel were seized, and more than one of the pursuers believed that they were still along.

Yank, however, gave it as his opinion that none of the horses whose tracks they were following had been doubly laden.

The pursuers made a warlike appearance. They had armed themselves fully, and their feelings were depicted on their faces in the shape of stern frowns.

"I feel the meanest o' any man in Montana," suddenly broke out Sheriff Bradley.

"Why so?" asked Ayot.

"Ter think I tried ter save them skunks from the lynchers last night."

"The lynchers didn't come, so it made no odds."

"I don't keer; I'm morally guilty. Wish I'd trotted Parkman and Jackingham right over ter the jail an' said ter the boys, 'Hyar's yer game! I didn't, an' that's why I'm a fool an' a villain."

"You may redeem yourself yet."

"Yes, but that won't undo my fool-work of last night. Say, look hyar."

The worthy sheriff spoke the added words suddenly.

"Well?" questioned Ayot.

"The minute we git back ter Sassajack I'm goin' ter resign the office o' sheriff."

"Nonsense!"

"Tain't nonsense. A sheriff so big a fool that he won't let the boys hang a rascal when they want to ain't fit fur office!"

Bradley emphasized this novel assertion by smiting his thigh vigorously, but just then Yank Yellowbird reined in his horse.

"Wait an artom," he directed. "Hyar's a complication!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE YELLOW BAR.

THE mountaineer had paused where a gulch dwindled away to a nearly flat area, where a narrow line of soil was bordered on two sides by far-stretching ledges.

Rube Herndon was enough of a trailer to see that the trail did not continue in the soil beyond them.

"The atrocious insex hev took ter the ledges," Yank Yellowbird added. "I've ben expectin' somethin' o' the sort. Them rocks reach some leetle distance, I consait, an' are pooty nigh as level as a floor. The runaways want ter puzzle us."

"Are you afraid of losing the trail?" Ayot asked.

Nevermiss looked at the speaker in mild surprise.

"Land o' Goshen! I reckon you don't know the Yellowbirds, mister," he observed, shaking his head gravely. "The fam'ly ain't missed a trail sence my ancestor, Adam Yellowbird, trailed down some boys that stole fruit out o' his garden at Eden. Adam wanted all the fruit hisself, ye see—an egregious hand fur fruit, was

Adam. I've sometimes thought 'twould b'en better fur him ef he had eat less, but 'twas all Eve's fault. He'd no business ter marry Eve. He was pop'lar among the girls, like all the Yellowbirds; an' he might 'a' had his choice. I've heerd it said Eve was vain, an' keered more fur good clothes than fur the Yellowbird pedigree, anyhow. I don't like ter see an overdressed woman, by hurley!"

Yank had dismounted and made a careful survey of the ground at that point while he talked. He returned to his horse, and punctured his last remarks by waving his finger gravely at Bradley.

Then he abruptly turned away.

"Yonder is our road, I consait. Them ledges don't run many rods, an' when they eend the trail will strike earth again, prob'ly. Only one on us need take ter the rocks; I'll go thar, an' the rest on ye ride on whar the way is easy, keepin' me in sight."

The party started, and the mountaineer, after a sweeping glance around, moved along the ledge on foot. That glance had been a critical one, and he had arrived at a conclusion, by means of the character of the place, as to where the fugitives would be likely to go.

Walking directly to that point, he found that the edge of the ledge was lapped by a small, deep stream which flowed toward the north-west.

A look of intelligence crossed his face.

"Somebody knew the place wal," he murmured.

He bent over the water, but not a sign could he see that any person or thing had passed that way. The water flowed over dark mud, and was proof against the keenest eyes.

"In all human likeness, the varmints went this way," Yank added. "Thought they could throw pursuers off'n the track by takin' ter water, eh? Wal, we'll see; but ef I let them in-sex fool me, thar will be the most egregious sort o' a blot on the Yellowbird pedigree."

The rest of the party rode up, and he explained the situation. He had one thing to do, however, before it would be safe to follow the stream; he must make the circuit of the ledge, and be sure that the abductors did not leave it elsewhere.

He did this, and then returned.

"We'll go on, Rube, I consait you ain't a novice on the trail?"

"I am not an expert, though I have had considerable experience for my years."

"Modestly said, an' jest like you. Wal, I want you an' Rocky Mountain Samson ter take the left bank, go on foot, an' look sharp ter see whar the critters left the water. I'll go on the op'ite side, an' the rest o' the crowd will foller me with the hosses."

"You reduce us to nonentities," observed Ayot.

"Ter what?"

"Nonentities—nobody's, as it were."

"He knows our real value," laughed Bradley.

"None-tighters is a new word ter me, but I'm much obleeged for it," gravely added Nevermiss. "The vocabulum o' the Yellowbirds has been pooty full, but we'll let in none-tighters. I consait I'll keep it in a box, though, fur I don't jest like it. Mehbe it'll do fur rainy days, how-s'ever."

Pointing down the stream, the mountaineer added in a sharper voice:

"Come on!"

He led the way at considerable speed, but never fast enough to endanger their object. It was old, familiar work. He had followed the trail in every State and Territory west of the Father of Waters, and the signs thereof were to him as the printed characters of a book to a scholar.

His gaze was never at rest. It flashed from the ground to the adjacent rocks; then to Gabe and Rube; then back to the ground. He was satisfied with his assistants from the first; in a very short time he knew that Rube was no mean trailer.

Thus they went on for nearly two hundred yards, when Yank found the landing-place of the fugitives on his bank. They had taken some precautions, but they were useless.

During the next mile there were several devices to delay, but never to perplex them. Amateurs might have been baffled; Yank Yellowbird was not.

After that the fugitives had resorted only to speed, but this had been practiced to such a degree as to show that they realized the danger behind them.

Noon found the pursuers still in the saddle. Seeking to cut down the intervening space, they would not stop to eat. They did not make any halt until two hours later—then it became necessary.

They had gained, but not as fast as could have been wished. The abductors were evidently getting all the speed out of their horses that they could—those of the pursuers were feeling the chase greatly.

In this crisis Yank's good judgment was shown. Believing that their adversaries were sure to break down their horses, he declined to let his party follow suit; better save theirs, and profit by the indiscretions of the fugitives.

The halt was accordingly made.

Resuming the way, anon, they rode on as before. Speed soon became out of the question. The way was rough and, at times, dangerous. The region might have been thought an untrodden wilderness but for the trail. Gigantic trees, almost impassable ridges and bold, ragged cliffs were seen by the way.

It was like the home of Nature.

Darkness fell at last, and there the pursuit ended for the day. Not once had the fugitives been sighted, but there was one consolation—the lead of the abductors had been greatly cut down, and every one was hopeful.

Yank forbade the firing of a rifle or kindling of a fire, so they ate what they had and camped under a huge tree.

An hour passed, and then Yank arose.

"I'm goin' on a bit o' a tramp," he quietly announced. "My legs need stretchin'."

Rube looked at him quickly.

"May I go with you?"

"Ef you wish, lad."

"I certainly do."

Rube arose with alacrity and took his rifle, and then the two left the camp.

"Nevermiss," said the younger man, "you are going to look for the enemy."

"Why d'ye think so?"

"Instinct, possibly. Your manner told no tales, but I felt sure of it."

"You were right. I consait we're within a mil'd o' the varmints now."

"And you propose to find them?"

"I mean ter try."

"It will be no easy task, yet I have seen enough of woodcraft to know what a veteran can do."

"One thing we want ter do is ter be uncommon sly. I'd hev took all our party along, but I'm afeerd Bradley an' Ayot would be wuss than an egregious bull, fur makin' a commotion. Ayot says he's a none-tighter, an' I consait he got it about right."

The mountaineer spoke good-humoredly. His allies were brave men, but he had none too good an opinion of their skill.

In Rube, however, he placed confidence.

Their way was through a fairly level forest, where the dense growth of large trees had kept down underbrush. It was intensely dark, but progress was easy, and they pursued their way under a canopy of leafy boughs.

Yank was constantly on the alert. Rube noticed that scarcely a sound betrayed the mountaineer's footfalls. He tried to equal this skill, but, failing, admired it all the more. He could also imagine how those keen eyes were constantly on the alert. The first visible sign would be detected by them.

Yank was by no means certain that anything would be discovered, but he knew they had nearly closed the gap, and, considering the artifices they had used to throw pursuers off the track, it was not likely that the abductors would force their horses to travel all night.

If they had camped they would probably have a fire, and it was chiefly for this that he was looking.

Nor was he disappointed. He suddenly stopped, touched Rube's arm and pointed upward.

"Look!" he tersely directed.

Rube obeyed. High above them—much higher than he would have thought of looking—a bar of light cut the darkness. It seemed to be in mid-air, distinct from everything else, like a fiery sword hung in the heavens. Considering its elevation it puzzled him, and he instinctively asked:

"What phenomenon is this?"

"It's the fleanomenon of a light shinin' from a winder," Yank replied.

"A window in the sky? How is that?"

"Jest what we must l'arn. I don't fully understand it, myself. Winders don't grow up in the sky unless they're hitched onter somethin'. Mehbe it's a tower o' Babel, about which the Yellowbird pedigree has somethin' ter say. In any case, I consait we'll find our kidnappers right thar."

CHAPTER XXV.

ROCK CASTLE.

"How do you account for the window?" asked Herndon. "Is there a town here?"

"Bradley said thar wa'n't one fur fifty miles, an' I s'pose he ought ter know, but what we see we do see, I consait. Best way we kin do is ter investigate right away. We may be nigh folks that never heerd o' our atrocious in-sex, but it won't do any harm ter take a look at 'em."

They had been moving toward the light as he spoke, and one part of the mystery was soon explained. They reached a cliff which rose with almost mathematical precision in a perpendicular line, nearing its head a hundred feet above the general level, and at the top was the light.

"The tower o' Babel, sure as you live," said the mountaineer, in a low voice. "I never expected ter find a Yellowbird buildin' hyar."

"The cliff looks unscalable," observed Rube.

"It is, at this p'int, but I consait thar must be away up. Tain't likely the folks who live thar hev wings, though one o' the Yellowbirds—Icarus, was his fu'st name—did indulge in sech things. He did wal, too, until he got so

nigh the sun, one day, that the heat melted the wax which held his wings on, and he come down ker-thump an' was egregiously broosed. Come this way; I consait thar is some way up. Step an artom keerful, but danger is pooty thick, I reckon."

Carefully they passed along the south side of the cliff. This, like that on the edge of which stood whatever building was above—the west—was for a time precipitous, but it gradually fell away to an incline.

Yank finally paused again.

"I consait this is the p'int ter go up. I needn't say ter one o' your judgment that we want ter be wary as dogs in flea-time. It wouldn't s'prise me ef thar was men in multitudes up thar, an' men who don't keer an egregious bit fur human life."

"In any case, we must be cautious," Rube returned. "If Ruth and Isabel are there, we have the greatest of motives for caution."

"To be sure. Bear up, lad; bear up, an' it'll all come out wal. Foller me!"

The veteran took one step, and then turned to make one of his whimsical remarks.

"Ef ye see my left foot waverin', hit it an egregious whack. It may git skeered—the weak sister may."

A transient smile appeared on Rube's face; he made reply; and then the ascent was begun.

The way was up a steep ledge, where detached boulders and crevices alike served as footholds—a rough, dangerous way in the darkness, and one where great caution was necessary to avoid starting loose stones which might rattle back to the bottom.

Nevermiss began the task with cool confidence which never degenerated into recklessness; indeed, he seemed to writhe and crawl, rather than climb, as a snake might have done.

They went slowly and steadily until near the top, when Yank suddenly dropped to the surface of the rock.

"Down! Somebody's comin'!"

Rube promptly obeyed. He, too, heard the voices which had attracted the attention of his pard. He dropped to the cover of a rock and lay motionless; and then two men appeared on the edge of the ledge, not ten feet away.

Only the darkness saved the adventurers from discovery.

"Of course we'll take you in," said the voice above, "but I hope it won't ruin us."

"How can it?" asked the second man.

"If we're discovered, our lives won't be worth a picayune. We are outlaws, as you well know; we only shelter you at the risk of being gobbled up along with you."

"No danger of that, I think."

"You will be pursued."

"We left a trail hard to follow."

"Are there any trailers at Sassajack?"

"I doubt if there is one."

"Do you remember the name you mentioned awhile ago?"

"What name?"

"Yank Yellowbird."

The previous speaker—whom Rube had readily recognized as Wells Parkman—did not reply at once; and the second man added:

"I've heard of that long-legged spider before."

"He's only a man."

"I ain't so sure of that. They say that his skill is something wonderful. I once had a friend—Joseph Lovering, was his name—who settled in Utah and was doing a fine stroke of business until Yank Yellowbird came along. That fellow is never so happy as when he's meddling with what don't concern him. He ruined Lovering and brought him to death; he'll ruin us if he manages to follow your trail. I hate the lank, long-legged, hon'ely, meddling fool!"

The man spoke with bitter emphasis which testified to his sincerity.

"Really, Brodhawk, I can't believe all these fairy stories about Yellowbird," Parkman slowly returned.

"How can you help it? Everybody has a word to say for him; he is known far and wide; and I am not sure that he is over-estimated. As trapper, hunter and scout he has had long experience, and added to great sagacity is a species of luck which makes many think he bears a charmed life."

"Well, I don't believe even Yank Yellowbird can trail us here."

"I hope not," Brodhawk replied. "We won't speak of him any more—though I shall guard our refuge well to-night. Your captive birds don't seem in a mood for singing."

"They are ugly as furies," growled Parkman.

"A few days at Rock Castle will tame them. You are a stranger to me, but I take it you are not one of the namby-pamby sort, and that you will make your power felt right at the start."

"That is it, exactly."

"Handling a woman," pursued Brodhawk, philosophically, "is like governing a child. Somebody is going to be boss; if the parent isn't, the child will be. Same thing when a man is courting a girl."

"You can depend on me to be rigorous enough," Parkman replied, in a hard voice. "I am a hunted outlaw now, when only a few days

ago I was an honored citizen—and all because of that girl. I will break her spirit—you can bet high on that!"

"And your friend?"

"The same with Asa."

"Good! I thought Tecumseh Tubbs would not send any milksops here. By the way, I am sorry Tubbs did not come, too."

"As I told you before, he may do so in a day or two. He is now engaged in some work where he is a kind of protector to a woman, and I reckon she would not hear to his leaving her."

"Where are they now?"

"Near Sassajack, somewhere."

"Does Tubbs know Yank Yellowbird?"

"By sight, yes. But why does your mind dwell so persistently upon that slab-sided villain?"

"I am worried to hear that he is near here. Ruin always follows his work. He is a man with a conscience, whatever that is; one of these over-good sneaks who feel called upon to meddle with free-and-easy fellows like me and my men. There isn't one of our party who knows him by sight except you and Asa Jackingham—I've talked with my own followers about it—or I would post a man off right away to see if he could shoot the scoundrel."

"Don't be afraid! Yank Yellowbird won't molest us. We left a trail even he can't follow."

"What about the messenger Tubbs was to send, to tell us how the news fell on Sassajack?" thoughtfully asked Brodhawk. "When will he be here?"

"Possibly to-night; perhaps not until twenty-four hours later."

"Who will he be?"

"That I don't know."

"I hope he will be a trustworthy man."

"Rest assured, he will."

"Well, when that man comes I am going to hire him to go back and shoot Yellowbird."

"Just as you say."

"Of course you will use your influence?"

"If you wish; but bear in mind that the unknown messenger will come to you, not to me."

"We'll fix it some way."

"And now," added Parkman, "I must get to bed. I am half-dead with fatigue and loss of sleep. Asa Jackingham is long since asleep; I must follow his example. And remember, Brodhawk, I am not to be called on any account until morning."

"We won't call you unless we are attacked, and I reckon there is no danger of that to-night. If the messenger comes from Tubbs, his news can wait until morning."

There was a moment's pause, during which Brodhawk looked fixedly into the darkness. His eyes were keen, but he saw nothing of the two human figures lying among the rocks so near him.

He turned away, and, accompanied by Parkman, moved toward the mysterious dwelling. Rube Herndon laid his hand on Yank's arm.

"A lucky escape, mountaineer," he observed. "Yes, I consait so. Likewise a good chance ter see myself as some folks see me," grimly returned Nevermiss. "Did ye hear the opprob'us epaulets they a'plied ter me?"

"Never mind their epithets. Recollect where they came from."

"I do, an' it don't worry me an atom, except that I'm sorry they don't think me pooty. Homely, lank, slab-sided, long-legged; fool, sneak, scoundrel, meddler; them was some o' the opprob'us epaulets they a'plied ter me. I feel honored, by hurley! An' now, lad, let us rise up an' shake ourselves tergether. I'm goin' inter Rock Castle!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

YANK YELLOWBIRD'S VENTURE.

HERNDON looked earnestly at the mountaineer.

"Do you really mean it?" he asked.

"To be sure."

"There is no room to doubt that Ruth and Isabel are there."

"I consait not."

"Do you think you can go in secretly?"

"I sha'n't try," Yank quietly replied.

"What?"

"Did ye hear the varmints say that a messenger was expected from Tecumseh Tubbs ter report how Sassajack took the news?"

"Yes, but—"

"I'm him!"

Nevermiss grounded his long rifle, thrust his face forward and added:

"I'm him, an' I'm a bad 'un. I'm a desperado o' the fu'st water. I'm a worshiper o' villainy, gore an' voy'lence. I'm a cut-throat b'iled down until I'm strong as lye. I'm tough, an' a galls-bird, an' an outlaw. I'm bad all the way through. Wah! wah!"

The usual mild manner of the tall mountaineer had disappeared; he seemed to be a changed man; he was coarse, rough, and as boisterous as was safe.

"Great heavens! it will not do, Yank!"

"Why not?"

"You will be recognized and murdered!"

"Did ye hear Brodhawk say that not a soul in thar knew me by sight but Parkman an' Jackingham?—an' did yer hear Parkman say he an' his frien', Asa, was not ter be called until mornin', anyhow? Wal, why shouldn't I be the messenger from Tecumseh Tubbs?"

"It is extremely hazardous."

"Lots o' things be."

"I suppose your object is—"

"Ter rescue the gals. I consait it would be hard fur an outsider ter git in onseen. Ef you've obsarved Rock Castle as much as I hev, you may hev noticed that it is built o' solid rock-work fur ten or fifteen feet up. Not an easy place ter enter on the sly. Brodhawk went up a sort o' ladder, which was drawn in arter him. Besides this, he will hev a guard posted. I consait it would be hard ter git in on the sly, but as Tubbs's messenger I kin go right in, an', once thar, I kin work fur Ruth an' Isabel."

"I greatly fear you will be recognized."

"I'll take the risk."

"Giving a false name?"

"To be sure."

"Beware that you don't refer to the Yellowbird 'pedigreen'!"

"I won't. Fur the time bein' the Yellowbird pedigree must take keer o' itself. Same o' the newrol'gy an' the weak sister."

"Of course it will be as you think best. Your judgment is better than mine, but be careful, mountaineer—be careful."

"I will."

"And what is to be my part?"

"Stay right hyar. Ef you hear me call, you kin come an' mix in any fracas that may show up, but don't come otherwise. I wish thar was one other man hyar, now. I onc't had a partner named Trail-Lifter; a young Modoc Injun. Now I don't admire Injuns greatly as a gn'ral thing, but he was as honest an' cunnin' as they make 'em. Hard ter fool was Trail-Lifter. He's jined the Sioux, an' is som'ers up North. No hope o' seein' him."

"We have other friends near."

"To be sure, an' I was thinkin' o' them. D'ye s'pose you could find yer way back ter them? Rec'lect it is some ways, an' dark as hurley, an' they ain't got no light."

"I remember; yet I'll do my best to find them. I think I can."

"You may try, then. Bring 'em hyar, an' stow 'em away in the holes in the rocks. Above all, make that pompous sheriff an' Ayot onderstan' that caution is now the irrefragible rule. I ain't afeerd Rocky Mountain Samson would be rash, but them two never was cut out fur borderers."

Rube promised to do all that he could to carry out these directions, and, after some further talk, he took his departure.

Yank waited a few minutes, and then turned toward Rock Castle.

"Now for it!" he muttered. "I consait thar will be an egregious heap o' triberlation an' distress afore this matter is eended, but the gals must not be left in sech hands. Land o' Goshen! the Yellowbird pedigree never could stan' the shock ef I backed out. I only hope the newrol'gy an' the weak sister won't harass me—I do, by hurley!"

Even in this crisis the humor of the tall mountaineer could not be kept down. A quaint smile crossed his face, and he shook his forefinger at the grim castle.

"I'm comin'," quoth he, and then moved briskly forward.

Straight to the entrance of the castle he moved, but before he felt called upon to make his presence known proof was vouchsafed that he had been seen.

"Halt! who goes thar?" cried some one from above.

Yank promptly halted.

"I'm a pilgrim an' a stranger," promptly answered Nevermiss. "I'm a wanderer in the lands o' iniquity, an' likewise in the woods. I'm tough, an' I'm proud on't."

"What're ye doin' hyar?"

"Lookin' fur Rock Castle, an' I reckon I've found it. Ef I hev, say ter Brodhawk that I want see him."

There was a slight pause above; the murmur of voices; and then a reply.

"Wait whar you be," directed the unseen speaker.

Yank waited, and he improved the chance to look about. The gigantic rock, or ledge, which was the foundation of the outlaws' home, here came to a point forty feet wide. The castle was built to the edge, so that it could be approached on one side only. As Yank had before suspected, the castle itself was of blocks of stone, laid with some skill. For fifteen feet upward it was solid wall; then came an upper story which projected two feet over the first; and there was the entrance.

It was a strong, gloomy, forbidding-looking building, and seemed well named—Rock Castle. It would be almost impossible to capture it by storm.

Suddenly a voice sounded above which Yank at once recognized.

"Who are you, down there?"

"My name is Ben Gore."

"Who do you want to see?"

"Brodhawk."

"I am he. What is your business?"

"I'm a messenger, sent by one Tecumseh Tubbs, ter wit, namely. Come on important business—"

"Enough!—tell your story inside. Down with the ladder, men!"

Promptly the ladder slid down.

"Ascend!" added Brodhawk.

Yank obeyed. He knew that he was going among desperate men who would take his life as unhesitatingly as they would that of a grizzly bear if he was discovered, but the tall mountaineer went up coolly. Danger had been his almost constant companion for many years, and though he never sought it willingly, he did not regard his life too precious to be risked in a good cause.

Reaching the top of the ladder he was led forward to a lighted room—which, however, had no window to send out a betraying light—and there he saw Brodhawk more distinctly; a tall, well-formed, dark-complexioned man of middle age.

Two keen eyes were upon the mountaineer, and there was something like suspicion in their expression.

"Well, who are you?" he demanded.

"My name ain't changed sence I tol' ye afore," composedly answered Nevermiss. "I'm Ben Gore."

"Why are you here?"

"I prob'ly neglected ter say I was sent by Mister Tecumseh Tubbs, a frien' o' mine."

"I don't believe it!" sharply cried Brodhawk.

"Oh! we be frien's," Yank innocently replied.

"I mean that I don't believe he sent you."

"Hope ye don't doubt my word, stranger?"

"I do."

"Let me 'vise ye kindly not ter do it, mister. I don't 'low it ter be done. I'm a bad man, I be. I was born Ben Gore, an' I ain't never got over it. A man must foller his name. I ain't goin' back on mine. I started out in life as Ben Gore, an' thar has b'en gore ever sence. I'm erbout as bad as they make 'em. I'm a fighter, I be; an' a slasher, an' a cavorter, an' a grizzly bear's claws, an' a razor all ground up sharp on a four-foot grin'-stone, an' a—"

"Stop this infernal nonsense!"

Brodhawk spoke imperiously. Honest Yank had puffed out his cheeks, contracted his brows, and tried his best to look like a desperado; but Brodhawk did not appreciate his efforts.

"Let us grant that you are what you claim," he added. "What is the message you bear?"

"Tubbs said—"

"Is the message verbal?"

"No; he was out o' writin' stuff, an' I was ter tell it to ye by word o' mouth."

"That is exactly the meaning of 'verbal,' but never mind. Go on!"

"Tubbs said: 'Tell Brodhawk thar is a tremenjous uproar at Sassajack, 'cause o' what Parkman an' Jackingham did, an' as they hev failed ter foller the trail, they hev sent word ter all the big towns ter let out fur the runaways.'"

"Did Tubbs say the pursuers had failed to find the trail?"

"Foller' was the word he used. They found one eend on't, but lost it ag'in."

"See here, my man," Brodhawk quickly added, "are you right from Sassajack? You are, eh? Well, do you know a man named Yank Yellowbird?"

CHAPTER XXVII.

A DANGEROUS SITUATION.

BRODHAWE's gaze was bent full upon the mountaineer, but he did not waver in the least. He was as cool as though no danger was at hand, yet Brodhawk had not yet dismissed his men. Three grim, ragged, dirty, but desperate-looking vagabonds were ready to obey their leader's orders, but they and their weapons were alike objects of indifference to Yank.

Quietly he answered:

"I b'lieve thar is sech a citter thar, but I don't know that I ever met him. I was never in Sassajack until last night, an' Tecumseh pressed me inter service so quick that I didn't git acquainted."

"Do you know if Yellowbird searched for the trail?"

"Think Tubbs said he did, but had ter give it up."

"Good! good! If the mountaineer has failed, we are safe enough."

Not a trace of relief appeared upon Yank's face.

"I didn't give all o' Tubbs's message," he added.

"What was the rest?"

"He said, 'tell Brodhawk ter lay low, an' all will be wal; an' I'll j'ine him as soon as is safe.'"

"Just so. Well, you and your message are welcome, Gore. Will you stay with us?"

"Wal, Tubbs thought mebbe I hadn't better go right back ter Sassajack."

"Not by any means," Brodhawk hastily agreed. "If you go, it must be another way than toward Sassajack. You'd better stay here."

"All right. I ain't partic'lar."

"Men, you can go."

All of Brodhawk's vagabonds disappeared save one. He, a superlatively dirty, ragged fellow, came forward and, squinting suspiciously at Yank with eyes where strabismus run riot, addressed his leader:

"I'd like ter say a word."

"Say it."

"I'd like ter ask this critter a few questions."

"Ask them."

"Critter, how'd ye git ter Rock Castle?"

"Critter, I rode on a hoss," Yank coolly replied.

"How'd you find yer way?"

"Pro'ly, I felt it."

"Critter, that don't answer."

"Critter, what be you drivin' at?" asked Yank, with all the outward ease and confidence imaginable.

"Yes, what do you mean?" added Brodhawk.

"This air critter may be all right," replied the cross-eyed man, squinting worse than ever, "but I can't see how the critter got hyar so quick; nor I can't see how he got hyar at all, when the critter says he's a stranger in these parts—"

"The critter didn't say nothin' o' the sort," quoth Yank, severely. "I said I'd never be'n in Sassajack afore, an' I never was; but I'd hunted 'long hyar afore the fu'st shanty was put up in Golden Moon Valley, an' this rock was hyar then. Or mebbe this fastidiously-dressed gent says the rock was *not* hyar? Ef he does, my name is Gore, an' I'll prove it. Come on, hoss!"

True to his assumed character, Yank doubled up his fists and tried his best to look like a villain. His success was not great. Nature never intended that honest face and comical mouth to bear anything worse than a stern expression; and though the mountaineer seemed fully in earnest, he did not look at all ferocious or villainous.

"Your explanation is satisfactory; no one doubts you," put in Brodhawk. "Sit down, and I will go and make arrangements for keeping you over-night."

The speaker left the room, followed by the cross-eyed man, who sent a suspicious squint back at Nevermiss.

There were rude, forest-made chairs in the room, and Yank coolly took one of them, set his long rifle up beside him, and awaited the progress of events.

The cross-eyed man suspected him—what would come of it?

There was no knowing, but the mountaineer wat in the enemy's lair, anyhow. Of course nothing could be done until the Castle grew quiet; then he hoped an opportunity would be vouchsafed him to wander about the place—which was divided into several rooms—and find Ruth and Isabel.

"I've got ter git 'em out somehow," he thought, "an' as thar seems ter be an egregious sprinklin' o' outlaws, it must be done on the sly. The Yellowbird pedigree is at stake, an' I mustn't be wu'sted—I mustn't, by hurley!"

The cross-eyed man re-entered the room with a supply of food.

"The cap'n sent this," he growled.

"Much obleeged ter him, an' ter you, too. Take it you're the waiter in this 'ere hotel. Don't do the cookin', do ye?"

"That is somethin' that is none o' yer business," was the surly reply, "but ef it'll do ye any good ter know, I *don't* do the cookin'."

"Thought not."

"How so?"

"The ginerous coatin' o' dirt on yer han's would nat'rally wash off ef ye did. Soak yer hands a few minutes in a basin o' water, an' you'd hev some egregious fine mud-pies."

"D'ye mean ter insult me?" harshly demanded the outlaw, with an increase of bad temper.

"Not much, I don't; I only stated a gin'ral fact."

"You'd better not. My name is Sam Smith—mebbe you've heerd on me?"

"Smith?" repeated Yank, thoughtfully. "No; never heerd the name afore."

"You lie, an' you know it!"

The putative Mr. Ben Gore set down the food to which he was giving attention, and, arising, drew his tall form to its utmost height.

"Mister," quoth he, "I'll postpone my supper until I lick you. I'm the ardentest lover fightin' ever had. I can't sleep o' nights unless I lick sev'ral men a day. I'm a'dicted with a curve o' the spine, an' the only way I kin overcome it is ter thrash each egregious varmint as you. Prepare!"

Yank swung his arms like flails, and really seemed determined to do all he threatened.

"Oh! dry up, critter!" replied Smith.

"I won't dry up, critter. I've been insulted—"

"Captain Brodhawk would hammer the life out o' both on us ef we got ter fightin'."

"Wal, I'll let ye off this time, as long as you 'polonize, but don't ye do it ag'in. My name is Ben Gore, an' I'm tough!"

Yank thrust one cheek out sharply with the aid of his tongue, grimaced, and then resumed eating.

"What ye lookin' at in the corner?" he continued.

"I ain't lookin' at no corner; I'm lookin' at you," growled the outlaw.

"Land o' Goshen! I'd nevers'pected it. Say, ye ree'ly must hev somethin' done fur them eyes o' your'n. Crookeder than a corkscrew, ain't they? Tough case, by hurley! Smith, you've got what a dentist would call *stray-frisk-mouth*."

"What's that?" inquired Smith, suspending his scowl for a moment to gratify his curiosity.

"It's an atrocious warp o' the eyes, wharby a man kin look seven ways at onc't, an' a woman 'leven ways. Woman is nat'rally slyer an' more onsartain than man. Now, ef Doctor Oxbow was hyar he'd op'rate on them eyes by cuttin' the narves, sinners an' tendrils—strabotomy, the art is called—an' them axles would git straight."

"Critter," savagely retorted Smith, "you mind your own business, an' I'll mind mine. Don't ye give me any more o' yer insults."

"It's done fur yer good, critter. When I see an atrocious insex as cross-eyed an' dirty as you be, I pity him—I do, by hurley!"

Smith glared at Yank the rage he either could not, or dared not, express. The veteran had resumed his old good-humored, whimsical manner, and his quiet blandness irritated as much as his words. His unwashed companion recovered speech after a short struggle with himself.

"I'll remember all this in ye," he slowly said, "but I ain't goin' ter quarrel now. I'm ter show ye whar ter sleep. Come with me, critter."

"Thank ye, critter," Yank returned; "you're a good-hearted feller at the bottom, an' ef ye only had a more gory s'peerit—like Ben Gore, which is me—you'd be all right. I'll go ter bed, fur I'm erbout tired out."

Smith led the way through another room to a third. This was a small place, with only a chair and a bed on the floor. Yank believed that it had just been arranged for him. Smith curtly stated that he was to pass the night there, and then, unheeding the guest's good-natured attempts to talk, went out. The room had no door, but a blanket was hung over the entrance. When this dropped, Yank was, in one sense of the word, alone.

He suspected that this was only a deceptive state of affairs.

Suspicious as Smith was, he was likely to maintain a watch if no one else did.

The mountaineer noticed that the room had only one outlet of any kind; there was no window, and the place was little better than a prison. He did not allow this to worry him. As calmly as though he was in his own shanty he lay down on the rude bed.

Having extinguished his light he was in total darkness, but his faithful weapons were by his side. He had no intention of sleeping. He had too little faith in his entertainers for that, for they were just the men to murder a helpless person in his sleep; and, besides, he had work to do.

If Ruth and Isabel were rescued by him, it must be that night. Tecumseh Tubbs's real messenger might come at any time, and, besides, the dawn of another day would bring him face to face with Parkman and Jackingham.

Detection would then be inevitable.

Yank's position was one of imminent danger; his life would be the penalty of discovery; yet he never lost his courage, nor felt a regret, nor faltered in his resolution to rescue the captive girls before the night passed away.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A PRISONER IS BROUGHT IN.

FOR an hour Yank could hear sounds about Rock Castle which indicated that the outlaws were astir; but these gradually died away, and there was nothing to indicate that any one was awake save himself.

He had used his sense of hearing to the utmost to discover if he was being watched at any time, but no such evidence was gained.

After the Castle became quiet he began to think more about Isabel and Ruth. They were somewhere in the Castle, but he did not know where. It would be extremely hazardous to try to find them, yet that was what must be done, though the chances were that he would run upon some of the outlaws before he could find the girls.

He wished in vain that he could communicate with his allies outside the Castle. If they could be secretly admitted there might be some hope in a bold attack on the enemy; but this could not be done unless the entrance was left unguarded, which was not likely to be done; and he could not communicate with them.

Inactivity was painful even to the veteran, and as soon as he dared, he cautiously arose.

The time had come to make a move.

His rifle he left concealed under the bed, but all his other weapons were retained. He moved to the entrance, and there paused and listened. Several minutes passed before he made another move, but as all remained quiet, he finally brushed the hanging blanket away. All was dark and silent beyond.

He left the room.

When brought in he had carefully noted the arrangement of such parts of the Castle as he saw, and he now moved quietly, cautiously, slowly toward the entrance.

The darkness was intense; he could see absolutely nothing; and at any moment he might stumble over some article of furniture, or a sleeping outlaw.

Neither misfortune occurred. Moving with caution which was surprising, he soon traversed the intervening distance and stood near the entrance to the Castle. Standing there he could see out plainly, and see the dull, cloudy sky in the distance.

If he imagined that the entrance was unguarded he was speedily undeceived. Voices sounded only a few feet away, close to the opening.

"I don't approve o' bringin' them women in, anyhow," grumbled one unseen person.

"Nor me."

"Women always bring trouble ter men."

"Fact, Tom."

"Trouble will come o' bringin' them girls in. Even Brodhawk thinks so."

"He'd no business ter take 'em in."

"He's sorry o' it, now."

"How do ye know?"

"He's troubled, Brodhawk is; I kin read it plain enough. Besides, why has he took some men an' gone out ter look erbout? Simply 'cause he's worried fur fear enemies may be nigh."

This revelation was of interest to Yank, but he was not certain whether it indicated a state of affairs favorable or the reverse.

Was the activity of the outlaws balanced by the fact that the force then inside was temporarily decreased?

"Do ye think any inemy is nigh?" the second man inquired.

"Can't say."

"Brodhawk must be afraid o' it, or he wouldn't go out."

"He is afraid o' it."

"Bad fur us."

"The mistake was in takin' the gals in, when their friends was sure ter be arter 'em. Here are we, free an' easy gents who git a livin' best way we kin, an' use Rock Castle for a refuge, ter fall back ter arter a foray. It's been a safe refuge, but I tell ye the bull thing will go ter the dogs now we've took in the females. The varmints bring ill-luck ev'ry time."

Yank Yellowbird waited for no more. His time to move was before Brodhawk returned, if ever, and he glided away again.

"Now fur the gals!" he thought. "Land o' Goshen! don't I wish I knew whar they be? I ain't got no time ter lose, anyhow, an' the next few minutes must settle the 'hull egregious business."

The mountaineer plainly understood how difficult it would be to pursue his investigations in the dark, and the fact that some of the outlaws were outside encouraged him to try bold measures.

He had a lamp in his room, and with the aid of this, lighted, he could do his work far quicker than by moving in the dark. True, the showing of the light would be dangerous, but so would it be to wander around by chance, and risk running upon his enemies.

His decision was quickly made.

Acting upon it, he secured and lighted the lamp, and then his work began.

Examination showed him that the main floor of the Castle was divided into four rooms. Two, of which his own was one, were small; while two were large. Of the latter, one was the main room where he had had his talk with Brodhawk; the other was the sleeping-room of the outlaws. In this room he discovered five men, all apparently wrapped in slumber. One he recognized as Parkman; no doubt, a second was Asa Jackingham.

Thus far he had seen no sign of Ruth and Isabel, but a stairway which led to the lower part of the Castle indicated where they were. Encouraged by the fact that he had thus far escaped discovery, Yank went steadily down.

A corridor divided this floor, and from it opened three doors. All were of rude, backwoods manufacture, but they answered all purposes. Yank was at once impressed by the fact that one of these doors was secured by a heavy padlock, and from that moment he had no doubt that he had found the girls' prison.

Not yet did he investigate, however; he tried the door nearest him. It opened into a room plainly used as a sleeping apartment, but was vacant. The next was almost exactly like it.

Only the locked room remained.

He moved forward, listened, tried the lock; but all to no purpose. He ventured a light knock on the door.

No answer was returned.

Yank waited a moment and then repeated the knock, but it was not until the third time that he heard the least thing. Then there was an audible sound beyond him—the rustling of a dress, he thought.

Once more he knocked.

"Who is there?" asked a female voice, somewhat tremulously, Yank thought.

"Gal, be you thar?" he quickly returned.

"Yes," was the reply.

"Speak yer name."
There was a brief hesitation; then the answer came.

"Isabel Rand."
"By hurley! I thought so!"
"Yank Yellowbird!" exclaimed another voice, which he believed to be that of Ruth.
"Car'fully, gals, car'fully. Be you two held pris'ners hyar?"

"Yes, yes; and, oh! Mr. Yellowbird, won't you help us out?" was the agitated reply.
"I'll do my best, little one, but the egregious door is locked. D'ye know whar the key is?"

"No."
"Then I must git su'thin' ter force the lock. I'll do it right off, quick. See hyar; I want you ter clearly onnerstand the facts in this atrocious case. Thar is a heap o' triberlation an' distress about it. This here Bluebirds Castle is full o' outlaws, an' I've sorter sneaked in ter beat 'em; so you'll see what an egregious mess I'm liable ter git inter. Now, ef I fail, or you are questioned, or anything happens, don't you let on you've heard from me, or know my name, or rec'nize me. See?"

"Yes," was the quick reply. "Have no fear as to us; we will do our best."
"You hev other frien's nigh. Kin you guess who?"

"Tell us."
"The names are an artom like Dix and Hern-don. Now I'm goin'; I'll try ter be back direck-ly."

The mountaineer hurried away. He believed that if he was let alone he could find something on the upper floor with which to force the lock; and this he determined to do at once, and then attack the guard at the entrance single-handed and try to get the prisoners away.

He reached the main room above, but just as he did so there was a stir at the entrance and several men entered the Castle somewhat noisily.

Yank had barely time enough to retreat to the little room allotted to him. Once there he turned and looked out past the hanging blanket.

Brodhawk and his party had returned, and—they had brought a prisoner.

The mountaineer started as he recognized this man; it was Sandy Whiskers.

Of all men Yank had least expected to see the lone miner, yet there he was, and in condition which showed he had only been taken after a hard fight. The prisoner's clothing was disarranged and torn, and one side of his face was red with blood which slowly trickled from a scalp-wound.

Evidently he had not been the only sufferer, for one of the outlaws was helped away, while his feeble movements bespoke a hurt worse than Sandy Whiskers had received.

Brodhawk set himself angrily before the prisoner, and in a furious voice he cried:

"You scoundrel! I am tempted to string you up by the neck at once!"

Sandy Whiskers did not waver.

"Do as ye please," was the steady reply.

"I will, by the fiends! and my will is that you die. My men are not to be cut to pieces with impunity. Hol men, bring a rope, and we will string this fellow up in a hurry!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

A NOCTURNAL DISTURBANCE.

SANDY WHISKERS did not waver in the least. He was a helpless prisoner and his death was contemplated, but he showed more manliness than ever before since he came to Golden Moon Valley. He's old, humble air had vanished, and he faced Brodhawk boldly, defiantly, while the red stain upon his face gave him a grim look.

"You kin hang me ef ye will," he firmly said,

"but it won't save you from judgment."

"Judgment! What do you mean?"

"Them who live by the sword shall die by the sword."

"Rubbish! Don't talk such stuff here."

"Will you give me a word, master?"

It was a soft, plausible voice, and Yank Yellowbird, watching from the cover of the blanket, had a new surprise. The last speaker was Steelblade, the Knife-Thrower.

Brodhawk turned upon him abruptly.

"Abl yes, yes; I had forgotten you. What have you to say? We owe you not a little. Who are you, and why are you here?"

"One question at a time, master," was the bland reply, and the speaker smiled. "My name is Steelblade, and I am here as your friend. I can tell you a good deal about that person."

He pointed to Sandy Whiskers.

"What about him? Who is he?"

"He comes from Sassajack, and it naturally follows that he must have followed my good friends, Parkman and Jackingham. As for his name, master, it is Sandy Whiskers."

"An odd name, by Jupiter!"

"Some men, master," quoth Steelblade, while his furtive eyes went into ambush, "do not care to be known by their real names."

Brodhawk laughed.

"There are a good many of us taken that way," he answered. "But about this prisoner. What is he? What aching, void did he fill at Sassajack?"

"None, whatever. He was an unsocial, lone,

morose dweller. He mined alone, kept himself aloof from his fellow men, and was a mystery to nearly all at the Golden Moon."

"Did he know the girls?"

Steelblade's eyes contracted.

"Master, he did."

"Was he their friend?"

"That's what puzzles me. He claimed to be, and was very anxious to put himself forward and be near them, but there were some doubts. Anyway, there can be no doubt that he was trying to find them when you captured him."

"Exactly; I am free to admit that, and I will shortly deal with him. One word as to yourself. Your information that he was concealed in the thicket led to his capture, but I want to ask who you are, anyway."

"I am named Steelblade, as I said before; and I am the friend of Parkman and Jackingham—"

"Do they expect you?"

"No; but I am in their confidence, and when I found, in the morning, that the miners of Sassajack were connecting me with what had been done, I knew it was no place for me. So I came on to join Parkman and his friend."

"How did you know where they were?"

Steelblade smiled.

"I may as well say that I helped them last night. Only for me they would now be in prison."

"Abl I think I've heard of you. Of course you know Tecumseh Tubbs?"

"Ob! yes, master."

Yank Yellowbird, listening behind the blanket, expected that the next question would relate to Tecumseh's "messenger," but it was not made,

"How did you know this man was near?"

Brodhawk pointed to Sandy Whiskers.

"Well, master, when I reached here, I decided that it would be far safer for me to wait until morning before seeking to enter. I lay down quietly, but soon saw some one else moving. I recognized Sandy Whiskers. Soon after, you and your men appeared, and I promptly notified you that a spy was near."

"Do you think he was alone?"

"Yes, master; I saw him leave Sassajack alone."

"Did you see a party led by one Yank Yellowbird take up the trail?"

Nevermiss waited eagerly for the reply. Was detection at hand?

"I saw them, master," Steelblade returned.

"What was their success?"

"I heard that they failed to follow the trail."

The reply gave great relief to two listeners.

The Knife-Thrower had heard such a report, though, as already shown, it was unfounded, but it was a most fortunate error for Yank Yellowbird. The latter breathed a sigh of relief, while Brodhawk's face brightened.

"All's well," he cheerfully continued, "and you have my thanks, Steelblade. In the morning you shall see Parkman and Jackingham, but they are now sleeping, utterly wearied out by their long day's ride."

Once more Yank had cause to feel relieved. If he was finding his work hard, he was being favored by small chances any one of which, resulting differently, might bring him to detection.

"Now, as to this fellow," added the outlaw captain, turning to Sandy Whiskers. "Knave, what have you to say why you shouldn't be hung?"

"The power is in yer hands."

Sandy Whiskers spoke with the steadiness which he had before shown, and which was so much in contrast to his usual manner.

"And you deserve it."

"Say what ye will."

"Did you come here to rescue certain girls?"

"That is my business."

"None of your insolence, dog!"

"You can't scare me with threats," Sandy Whiskers firmly replied. "My life ain't wuth nothin' ter me nor nobody else; you kin take it ef ye see fit."

"Don't be too willing, fellow; we may see fit to take you at your word. Not to-night, though; I, for one, want some sleep. We'll attend to your case in the morning. Men, take him to the room next to mine, and fasten him in."

Sandy Whiskers was hustled away, and Yank heard the party descending to the lower floor.

Then Brodhawk spoke in a low voice to one of his men, and the outlaws gave indications of retiring for the night.

Yank Yellowbird had noticed that his old enemy, Smith, frequently glanced toward the little room, and, suspecting that he would be subjected to observation, the mountaineer took measures to make himself safe.

Smith did investigate, but when he looked in he saw Nevermiss lying peacefully upon his bed.

After that the Castle soon became quiet, but a step had been taken which interfered with Yank's free movements. Smith and another man spread their blankets in the main room and lay down there.

Yank stroked his beard meditatively as he noticed this.

"Does it mean that they're s'picious o' me, or is it a gin'ral precaution?" he wondered. "Any-

how, it complerates matters egregiously. Thar ain't a room now but has somebody in it, an' 'twill be like runnin' the gantlet ter git out. Land o' Goshen! I'm afeerd thar will be a heap o' triberlation an' distress afore mornin'. Wonder whar Rube is? Ef I had him an' the others hyar I'd resk an attack, but I can't git out ter summon 'em. It's goin' ter be a close squeeze—it is, by hurley!"

The mountaineer was not at ease. Personally he was without a grain of fear, but the chances of rescuing Ruth and Isabel were so few that he could not be blind to them.

The attempt, however, must be made.

Day would bring ruin to him if he remained where he was; the moment that Steelblade, Parkman or Jackingham saw him, his daring deceit would be revealed.

Another hour passed, during which time he lay on the blanket and waited patiently. By that time, he believed, all of the outlaws must be asleep except the guards at the entrance to the Castle; and it was possible that they were not alert.

In a few minutes the mountaineer would begin his desperate venture. The chances were greatly against him, and a less resolute man would have faltered, but not so Yank Yellowbird. He had won victory in many a desperate case before; he hoped that it might be done again.

He was about to rise when the stillness of the Castle was abruptly broken. A cry rung out on the air, sounding hoarse and muffled, and then came a sound as of a struggle at a distance.

Yank leaped to his feet, but he was not ahead of Smith and his fellow-outlaw. The veteran heard them spring up and hurry away somewhere; then followed further evidence of a struggle, and the sound of numerous feet in the next room.

"A light!—show a light!" cried a commanding voice, which was easily recognizable as that of Brodhawk.

The order was obeyed much sooner than he expected; an outlaw appeared from the sleeping-room, bearing a light, and then Yank Yellowbird had view of another striking scene.

There stood Sandy Whiskers in the hands of his captors, while all things went to show that he had been in another fight with them.

"You scoundrel!" shouted Brodhawk, "haven't we had enough trouble from you? What were you trying to do? Were you big enough fool to suppose you could get those girls away?"

One of the outlaws stepped forward.

"I've got an idee, cap'n."

"What is it?"

"Did ye notice the knife in his hand?"

"Of course."

"Wal, it's my opinion that he was goin' ter kill them."

CHAPTER XXX.

STEELBLADE'S ACCUSATION.

BRODHAWE looked considerably surprised.

"Kill the girls?" he repeated.

"Yes, cap'n."

"Why should he kill them?"

"I don't know that, but—"

"Nonsense! He would not be likely to kill them, since he came here as their friend."

"I am not at all sure that he *did* come here as their friend."

The last words were spoken by a new voice, soft and bland, and Steelblade, the Knife-Thrower, appeared on the scene, his furtive eyes turned upon Sandy Whiskers with a squint which left them singularly small.

"What do you mean?" impatiently demanded the outlaw leader.

"I told you before that Sandy Whiskers was sort of a riddle, and nobody at Sassajack knew just where to place him. He pretended to like the Rand girls, but when he came near them, he generally made a row. Now, it is my opinion he meant this time to murder them outright!"

Sandy Whiskers uttered a low cry, like one in physical pain.

"Murder them!" he cried, wildly. "I, murder them!"

"That's what I said, Master Whiskers."

"It is false—false!"

"Then why was he sneakin' inter their room, knife in hand?" demanded the outlaw who had first advanced the idea. "He was despr'itly in earnest about something. When we put him in his room he was fast bound, but he managed ter git free, push away the things we put outside the door ter hold it, an' then break the lock of the females' door. Active feller, Sandy Whiskers is. But what need o' slyin' in on the girls with a knife? I say, he meant ter kill 'em."

"Such is also my idea, masters," softly observed Steelblade.

"We'll have this settled right away!" declared Brodhawk. "Smith, take another man, and go down and bring those girls up at once."

The prisoner made a perceptible start, but said nothing. As Smith and his companion disappeared, the lone miner seemed to fall into deep thought, from which he did not arouse until the men reappeared.

With them came Isabel and Ruth. The girls looked pale and troubled, but were bearing their misfortunes with more firmness than was to be expected. As they were led into the room, they looked about as though in search of Yank Yellowbird, but he took care not to be visible.

Brodhawk let no time go to waste. "Sorry to disturb you, young women," he said, "but do you know this man?" He pointed to Sandy Whiskers. It was Isabel who answered:

"We have seen him."

"Is he a friend of yours?"

"No, sir."

"Are you sure?"

"I have no motive for concealment."

She spoke truthfully. She had grasped the situation as fully as possible, and seeing Steelblade there, felt that evasion would do no good. Had it not been for the Knife-Thrower, she would have denied all knowledge of the lone miner.

"Is he your enemy?" pursued Brodhawk.

"Not to my knowledge."

"Neither friend nor foe?"

"So I believe."

"Simply a casual acquaintance?"

"Yes, sir, and very slight at that."

"Then why did he, after wrenching open the lock of the door, sneak into your room with an unsheathed knife in his hand?"

"That I don't know."

Up to this time Steelblade had been standing in silence, but his eyes had grown exceedingly small as he looked furtively out of the ambush. He now moved forward, and bowing deeply, servilely, spoke in his softest, blandest voice.

"Mistress Isabel, possibly I can throw some light upon this affair. I can tell you some things you don't know, and convince you that Sandy Whiskers meant to assassinate you."

Isabel recoiled.

"Don't ye b'lieve it!" cried the lone miner, hoarsely; "don't ye b'lieve it, fur it's a lie!"

"Softly, Master Whiskers!" put in Steelblade, gently.

"I never did ye harm, gals, nor thought on't," persisted Sandy Whiskers, his broad face working convulsively. "I'd give my life for ye, any day—don't ye b'lieve I'd hurt ye—DON'T!"

Imploringly, almost wildly, were the last words spoken.

"Mistress," continued the Knife-Thrower, with humble persistence, "I ask you not to accept idle charges. I offer proof. Was not your father named Wallace Rand?"

Isabel exhibited some surprise.

"He was," she replied, after a pause.

"And you had an uncle named Robert Bruce Rand, did you not?"

The Knife-Thrower flashed a secret glance at Sandy Whiskers as he asked the last question. He was well rewarded; he saw the miner start and grow deathly pale.

"Yes," faintly replied Isabel.

"That uncle nearly became the victim of an assassin, did he not?"

A startled, troubled expression appeared on Isabel's face.

"Who are you who knows so much of our family history?"

"Mistress," answered Steelblade, bowing low, but speaking very rapidly, "I am one who knows that when Robert Bruce Rand nearly became the victim of an assassin, his own brother, Wallace Rand was accused of being his would-be murderer!"

"It was false!" passionately cried the elder sister. "Our father never did harm to any human being, least of all to his brother."

"He was as innocent as the angels!" impetuously added Ruth.

"Mistress, I believe you," servilely agreed the Knife-Thrower, "yet there must have been a criminal. Shall I tell you whom Wallace Rand suspected? His name was Peter Todd!"

Smiling sardonically, Steelblade flashed another glance at Sandy Whiskers. There was enough to interest him that time. Ashen-bued was the lone miner's face; his lower jaw had dropped strangely; and he was glaring at the speaker with eyes full of horror and wild terror.

"And there," added Steelblade, pointing to the miner, "stands Peter Todd!"

Sandy Whiskers fell upon his knees with a hoarse, frantic cry.

"I am innocent!" he exclaimed. "Before Heaven, I am innocent!"

Isabel looked at him with feverish interest, and seemed to forget every one else near her.

"You Peter Todd!" she enunciated, in an agitated tone.

"I am that miser'ble wretch," he confessed, almost with a groan, "but I never hurt Robert Rand."

"Some one did, and it was not my father."

"Mistress," put in Steelblade, in his most oily voice, "haven't you often heard Sandy Whiskers say that he was a guilty, sinful wretch?"

"It is false!—false!" reiterated the lone miner; "I never harmed Robert Rand."

"The guilt seemed to rest between you and my father."

Isabel made the assertion steadily, but there

was neither anger nor severity in her voice. She was too much confused, then, to form a definite opinion, and even if she had not been, she was not one whose womanly nature could turn to unwomanly harshness and venom.

"I couldn't 'a' done harm ter him if I wanted to," Sandy Whiskers protested. "He an' your father had both been my frien's, an' I loved 'em for it. I w'an't their equal, fur I was poor, an' ignorant, but I cared fur them as a dog might 'a' done, an' was jest as faithful."

"Possibly," gently insinuated Steelblade, his evil eyes going deeper into ambush, "Mistress Isabel would like to know why you came to Sassajack, why you hovered around her and her sister, and why—"

"It was ter help 'em—ter save 'em!" impetuously declared the lone miner.

"From what, Master Whiskers?"

The lone miner hesitated.

"From danger," he finally muttered.

"Mistress, were you in danger?" asked Steelblade.

"Not to my knowledge."

"I dare say the danger was only from Master Peter Todd," added the Knife-Thrower, his voice growing hard. "Behold the man who tried to kill Robert Rand—who ruined your father—who sneaked into your room to-night, knife in hand, to kill you and end the deadly vendetta he seems to have sworn against your family."

"Never! never!" cried Sandy Whiskers, with a wailing cry. "I would not harm the gals ter save my own life—I'd give my life for them."

"Very likely, master," commented Steelblade, with the shadow of a sneer.

"It is not likely!" interrupted Brodhawk, harshly. "I am satisfied that this fellow intended to assassinate the young women, and that he is a villain in every way. Furthermore, recognizing the fact that he is a man dangerous to me and my worthy associates, I intend to put a stop to his work at once. Men, bring a rope again, and this time we will do our task as it should be done. Sandy Whiskers shall hang!"

The lone miner started, but no word of pleading passed his lips. His gaze turned upon Isabel and Ruth, and though his face was still very pale, there was more of animal-like devotion than fear expressed on its rude features.

Yank Yellowbird grasped his weapons more tightly as he hovered behind the hanging blanket, and his forehead contracted into a frown.

"By hurley! this is gettin' serious!" he muttered. "Them atrocious insex mean mischief, an' Sandy is in most egregious danger. I've always said that human riddle was a wal-mean-in' critter, an' I say so now. His enemies are numerous, but I can't stan' idle hyar an' see him strung up—I can't an' I won't, by hurley!"

The mountaineer's gray eyes flashed an indignant glance at Parkman and Jackingham, whom he saw hovering near the outskirts of the group. They hoped that the prisoner would be sacrificed, but were crafty enough to keep back and leave the responsibility with some one else.

The rope was brought.

"Throw the noose over his head!" ordered Brodhawk, glancing at the bare timbers of ceiling which would furnish the necessary support.

Sandy Whiskers had risen to his feet. His manner was calmer than was to be expected, but he looked at Isabel and Ruth with a world of meaning in his expression.

The noose was cast over his head, and the loose end of the rope flung over a timber and grasped on the other side. Isabel and Ruth, confused and almost stunned by the rapidly occurring events and the threatened tragedy, now started forward, but Brodhawk pushed them back roughly.

"Pull on the rope!" he sternly directed.

The order was obeyed.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE BOUND LION.

ONCE more the deadly designs upon Sandy Whiskers were checked, and this time in a most exciting way.

It was not in the nature of Yank Yellowbird to stand idle and see such a deed consummated, whatever might be the result of interference. On the present occasion he had everything except the instinct of humanity to make him hold back. If he interfered he would encounter great odds—hopeless odds—and the last chance to help the Rand sisters might be swept away, but let the tragedy go on he could not.

As the rope tightened around the lone miner's neck, Nevermiss sprung into the room. In one hand he held his trusty rifle; in the other was his long-bladed knife.

With a whoop which would have done credit to a Sioux warrior he dashed headlong into the outlaw group.

He swept them aside; he reached the imperiled man; he cut the rope; he placed the knife and revolver in Sandy Whiskers's hand; and then he cried to the rescued man:

"Fight, Sandy—fight like hurley; yer life depends on't!"

All this had been done so quickly, so unexpectedly, that the outlaws had no time to pre-

vent it; and even when they realized that the putative "Ben Gore" had shown an unwelcome side of his character, they were too much dazed for prompt action.

Again the mountaineer sounded his wild war-whoop.

"Back, ye atrocious insex!" he shouted, striking down the man nearest the girls with his clubbed rifle. "Git out o' this, or thar'll be an egregious triberlation hyar! I've got the newrol'gy the wu'st way, an' I won't answer fur what it may do. Stan' back, or I may hit some on ye by mistake!"

All the while that he was talking the veteran had been striking out stoutly, and his assault forced the outlaws back for the time.

Yank reached the side of Isabel and Ruth.

"Make a break fur the entrance!" he exclaimed. "Git outside ef ye can, an' I consait you'll find friends som'er's nigh."

A ringing shout sounded at the entrance, and Rube Herndon dashed into the Castle, overturning one of the outlaws as he came.

Quickly he took in the state of affairs, and then he took place by Yank's side. Sandy Whiskers rallied from a dazed condition and followed his example, and then there were three champions for the girls.

"Make fur the entrance, gals!" again directed Yank Yellowbird. "Don't lose any time, but run!"

But some one else was equally clear-headed.

"Rally, all!" shouted Brodhawk. "Guard the entrance. Beat down the men, and hold the girls. Forward, all!"

His clear voice acted like magic upon his followers, and as one man they surged forward. In a compact body they flung themselves upon the brave trio of defenders, and a thrilling combat began. The odds were strong enough against the smaller party to have dismayed men less bold, but the fight they made answered for the state of their minds.

Standing as close as possible to each other, they struck out manfully, and their blows left many an aching head among the enemy as mementoes of the fight.

Yank Yellowbird was the hero of the occasion.

All those rare qualities which, report said, transformed him in battle from the mildest of men into a human whirlwind, now came to the front, and he made good his reputation as a wonderful fighter.

With a good cause to encourage him, he was not to be excelled.

He seemed to do the work of two men on this occasion, and where he fought there fared the outlaws the worst.

But there is a limit to human ability.

Beset by such overwhelming odds, the gallant trio found the fight startlingly warm, and the inevitable crash came when Sandy Whiskers was beaten to his knees; it left an opening, and in a moment more Rube Herndon was felled half senseless to the floor.

Then all the gang piled upon Yank.

Hemmed in upon all sides, he could no longer use that deadly rifle; but he gave no heed to their own blows, and endeavored to pass the solid wall of men and force his way to liberty. Again and again he shook off the hands laid upon him; his great efforts swayed the whole body of men, and his voice rose undauntedly when danger was the greatest; but, like a wounded lion beset by yelping curs, he was at last dragged down by the weight of numbers.

A thing had been accomplished which was rare in the man's history—he had been taken prisoner.

Overcome and bound at last he lay panting upon the floor, but his keen eyes were busy. He saw Rube near him in a fix as bad as his own; Ruth and Isabel were being hurried away to their former prison; while Sandy Whiskers had disappeared—no one knew where.

Captain Brodhawk had a scalp-wound cared for, spoke with Parkman a few moments, and then came to Yank with an evil smile on his face.

"Well, old fellow, how do you like it?" he asked.

"I'd thank ye ter be more implicit in yer remarks," Nevermiss coolly replied. "I don't know what in hurley ye refer ter."

"You are a prisoner."

"Glad you mentioned it; should never 'a' guessed the fack alone."

"How do your bonds feel?"

"Feel on 'em an' see. I can't, 'cause my hands are tied."

"Oh, you're very funny, ain't you?"

"Not much, I ain't; I ain't given ter levity."

"You are Yank Yellowbird?"

"Be I?"

"Do you deny your name?"

"Mister," quoth the mountaineer, with a frown, "I consait ye don't jestly know what you're takin' about. No Yellowbird ever denied his name yet, an' won't, neither, while the fam'ly pedigree is sech a miracle o' refulgence. Barrin' the newrol'gy an' a sporadikel case o' croup, rumbago, or plurality, thar ain't a blot on the record, an' the record goes back ter Adam Yellowbird, o' Eden Garding. We did hev the

names o' the fam'ly sev'ral ginerations afore Adam, but they was lost in crossin' the Red Sea on the ice. My uncle, Noah, headed the party, an' his clerk broke through the ice with the fam'ly pedigree-tree, an' sunk in five hundred fathoms o' water. They fished fur the tree nigh onto a month, but the egregious fish bit off all the books, an' the tree was lost."

"Master Yellowbird is disposed to be facetious," put in Steelblade's bland voice.

"Hullo! you thar, Stealhoss?"

"I am here, master," was the cheerful reply.

"I thought the air was atrocious p'isonous."

"Pay attention to me, Yank Yellowbird," sharply interrupted Brodhawk.

"I don't owe ye nothin', an' I ain't obleeged ter pay."

"You will cease your nonsense by and by. Do you know, I am rejoiced to have you in my hands. When I get through with you, there will be no more prating in the West about great, honest Yank Yellowbird. Do you understand?"

"I ain't deaf, mister."

"Go where you will," pursued Brodhawk, "men are talking about Yank Yellowbird and his exploits. Some fools idolize you. I know you better. Spy and meddler, your career is about over!"

"Land o' Goshen! who tol' ye, mister?" coolly asked the mountaineer.

"I need no telling, for I am the law here. I speak, and men obey. Before another night falls I shall say to my men: 'Hang this meddling fool!' and they will hang you!"

"Melancholy prognostic!" quoth Yank, with a humorous smile. "Listen ter the oracle! By hurley, Broad-chicken, you freeze my blood in my veins. It freezes easy sence I've had the newrol'gy so bad. Can't I beg off? I won't do so ag'in. Why not 'dopt me inter the band? I've got an awful hanker ter be 'dopted, an' I'll be as mean as I can, though thar ain't an artom o' hope that I kin be sech a mean skunk as you be!"

This whimsical badinage, thinly covering Yank's contempt and defiance as it did, irritated Brodhawk more than an angry reply would have done.

"Play the braggart while you can!" he retorted, as he turned away; "it will be my turn next, and then I'll show you that all men are not to be ruined and beaten by you."

There was an ugly expression on his face as he spoke. He walked toward the entrance and spoke to the guards. They had left their place during the fight, and were as ignorant as any one else of Sandy Whiskers's whereabouts, but as he was not in the Castle, it followed that he must have made good his escape.

Yank saw Parkman go forward and accost the outlaw leader.

"Some new shichickenary, I'll bet," observed the mountaineer, to Rube.

"The case looks bad, Yank."

"Jest an artom."

"Is there hope left?"

"Oceans on it, lad; don't be cast down. Whar are the rest o' our gang?"

He had lowered his voice to ask the question, and Herndon as cautiously replied:

"Only a few rods from the Castle; I only wonder that they did not come to our aid."

The approach of Brodhawk interrupted them.

"Cheer up, you pilgrims!" cried the captain, in a voice of exultation. "We are about to have some fun here—a great event—a wedding. My good friends, Parkman and Jackingham, are about to be married to the Rand sisters! Isn't that glorious news?"

CHAPTER XXXII.

A PAINFUL CRISIS.

A LAUGH and a cheer arose from the outlaws at their leader's words, but the effect upon Yank and Rube Herndon was such as to cause anything but mirth or pleasure. As yet Brodhawk's exact meaning was not clear, but his words were enough to make Rube start.

"That shot goes home, Brodhawk," declared Parkman. "Mister Herndon quails like the cur he is. I wish that Gabe Dix was here now. Those two men have been the ruin of me. By charging me and Asa Jackingham with a deed of which we were not guilty, they have reduced us from an honored position among men to outlawry."

"Your hour of satisfaction has come."

"Right you are."

"I propose to do considerable business to-night," pursued Brodhawk, thoughtfully. "The fact that Yank Yellowbird, and other men, are here shows that your trail was followed, and, I dare say, we shall soon have all Sassajack down upon us. Well, we will score the first point, anyhow."

"It will gladden Herndon's heart to see Ruth Rand become my wife," added Parkman, gloatingly.

"We will make it a double event. Smith, bring another rope. Monks, bring up the females again."

His followers hurried away on their errands, while Brodhawk once more turned to the mountaineer.

"Yank Yellowbird," he said, in a hard voice,

"to-night sees the end of your meddling. You have a bad habit of interfering with other men's business, and you have had rare luck. For once, luck is against you; you are in my power, and I propose to end your loping forever. It will be a glad relief to everybody in the West save a few milksops, like those you mix with. By sweeping you out of the world, I shall also revenge an old friend of mine whom you ruined—one Joseph Lovering."

"I knowed the man," coolly replied Nevermiss. "He was a piratical critter who run the town o' Dan City, in Utah; an' who was a murderer an' rascal. With the help of young Gold Gauntlet, I did worst the atrocious insex."

"Lovering was my friend; to-night, I avenge him."

"Jest as you say."

"Do you defy me?"

"Land o' Goshen! 'tain't anything to me. I ain't a legal voter in this Bluebird's Castle."

"In the morning you will be a clod."

"Who says so, mister?"

"I do!"

"I wouldn't take yer word in court," coolly replied Nevermiss.

"Here my word is law!"

"An egregious poor one."

"You shall see."

By this time Isabel and Ruth were again led to the main room—they came wondering what new ordeal was in store for them—and cross-eyed Smith appeared with a rope.

"Stand each of those men under the timber with a rope about his neck!" ordered Brodhawk, pointing to Yank and Rube.

The order was obeyed.

Rube was filled with impotent wrath, but his bonds were firm, and the feeble resistance he might have made would have been wholly useless. Yank viewed the rope with philosophical coolness and curiosity.

"It's the first time I've had a collar on fur twenty year," he remarked, in his old, mild way. "I don't fancy 'em as a rule, fur they make a man seem sorter proud an' stuck-up. This one strikes me as bein' an artom ha'sh to the skin, but mebbe I'll git used ter it. Wish it'd b'en wove with the soft side out. 'Member distinctly when I wore my first collar. It was down in a town called—"

"That will do!" interrupted the outlaw leader. "We will not hear any of your idle talk. How do you like the situation?"

"I, for one, admire it," Parkman declared.

Yank and Rube had no reason to be pleased. They stood under the beam; each had a noose around his neck; the free ends had been passed over the timber; and there stood the outlaws ready to pull and end the career of the prisoners at a given signal.

Isabel and Ruth were very pale, and the latter seemed scarcely able to stand. Rube looked at her bravely, encouragingly, but the brutal, gloating faces of the outlaws told her how terribly they were in earnest.

"Double the guard at the entrance," ordered Brodhawk, "and bid them stand with their rifles presented, hammers up, ready to shoot down any one who tries to enter. We won't be interrupted, this time."

Once more he turned to his prisoners.

"Now for the grand finale," he added. "Here are two young ladies, Isabel and Ruth, and yonder are two estimable gentlemen who love them devotedly, and wish to marry them. This wish shall promptly be gratified. Step forward, Wilkinson!"

A tall, slender, treacherous-looking outlaw advanced a pace.

"Here we have a man of erudition," pursued Brodhawk, "who used to be a genuine minister. For some misdemeanor he was expelled from the church, and is now one of our best rascals. The fact remains, though, that he was once a preacher. Eh, Wilk?"

"Verily, you are right, brother," was the slow, sanctimonious reply.

"Good! Well, then, in a word, Wilkinson will now marry the girls to Parkman and Jackingham, and Yellowbird and Herndon shall be among the witnesses. That's why I compelled them to put on collars. As this is a select occasion, all must be well dressed."

A hoarse laugh arose from the outlaws.

"Immediately after the bridal," continued the leader, "there will be another pleasant event. Parkman and Jackingham will conduct their wives below, and then Yellowbird and Herndon shall hang!"

The grimly facetious manner of the speaker suddenly vanished, and, grasping Yank's arm, he hissed in his ear:

"Meddling fool! your last hour has come!"

"Who set you up fur a prophet?" imperturbably returned the mountaineer. "Ef you're runnin' the bull machinery o' the universe, I never heard on't. Don't figger on the futur', or you may git egregiously left."

"We shall see."

"To be sure. At least some one on us will—I won't answer fur you."

"Parkman and Jackingham, take your brides," ordered Brodhawk.

The ex-miners advanced, but Ruth fell upon her knees before the outlaw captain.

"Mercy!" she cried; "have mercy upon us. We have never done harm to you—do not lend your aid to these men!"

"Don't kneel ter him, gall!" exclaimed Yank, a new light in his gray eyes. "Don't kneel ter sech a mean skunk!"

"Have your say, meddler; it is all you can do. Girl, rise to your feet!"

"Mercy! mercy!" Ruth repeated, wildly.

She essayed to clasp the outlaw's hand, but he struck her own hand sharply.

Rube Herndon grew pale and his breast heaved convulsively. The look which he bent upon Brodhawk told his frame of mind, but the outlaw saw it not.

Parkman lifted Ruth to her feet and, like Jackingham, he compelled his unwilling, struggling companion to face the ex-minister.

"All is ready for the bridal!" Brodhawk loudly cried. "Wilkinson, go on with the ceremony. We lack printed books here, but I reckon you remember enough of the rignmarole to answer all purposes. Marriage laws are not over-nice at Rock Castle."

"Men," exclaimed Rube Herndon, "is there not one among you with a spark of honor left? By the memory of your childhood's days, when you had some one sacred to you, I implore you to stop this work!"

"Silence!" thundered Brodhawk.

"Oh! let him go on," sneered Parkman. "Let the caged buzzard flutter."

"I will have no more talk," the outlaw declared. "Parson, go on with your work!"

Wilkinson assumed position to begin the iniquitous ceremony, and, despite the struggles of Ruth and Isabel, they were compelled to stand before him.

The ceremony began!

CHAPTER XXXIII.

SURPRISES FOR SOMEBODY.

THE outcast minister was not in the least averse to the work given him, but the habit of past years was strong, and his voice sounded singularly solemn and suitable to the dark deed in hand as he began the ceremony.

The first sentence was still on his lips, however, when he was interrupted.

Without the least warning the men who held Yank Yellowbird were cast aside so violently that they fell to the floor; there was a series of rapid movements; and, before any one could fully understand that the mountaineer was once more at liberty, he had cut Rube's bonds and freed both the latter and himself from the nooses lately placed over their necks.

"How it was done no one could realize, even then, but, as Yank again sounded his warwhoop, and, seizing a rifle, struck down its owner, all clearly understood that Nevermiss was not yet reduced to the position of a nonentity."

"Down with the atrocious insex!" shouted the veteran. "Fall to, Rube, an' fight like hurley! They can't take us ag'in, an' I know it. Take that!"

Yank spoke the last words as he felled Brodhawk, and then he doubled Parkman up with a blow in the stomach.

Once more all was uproar in the room, but some of those present were dimly conscious that there was a roar of rifles at the entrance.

Another moment, and Sandy Whiskers bounded into the room. He made a strange, startling appearance, for his face had a coating of half-dried blood from his old wound, and a wild glare was in his eyes.

His gaze flashed around the room, and then he leaped toward Ruth and Isabel. Some of the outlaws were in his path, but the length of sapling which he bore as a club arose and fell, and a path was cleared.

Yank hailed his arrival with a ringing shout, and once more the two men and Rube were partners in a determined fight.

But this time they were not to fight alone.

A cheer arose which did not come from the outlaws, yet which sounded from within the Castle.

Another moment and several men dashed from the north room into the main apartment.

At their head was Gladiator Gabe!

Another cheer sounded which seemed to shake the Castle.

The rescuers surged forward.

"Come on, ye glorious critters!" shouted Yank Yellowbird. "Wade in, an' devour the enemy. Down with the egregious varmints!"

The Rocky Mountain Samson and his followers sprung into the thickest of the affray.

Brodhawk's men were dumfounded and confused. How the assailants had entered the Castle they could not imagine; there was but one entrance, and they had not come that way. There they were, however, and they soon made themselves felt. Before the outlaws could recover their self-possession many were felled to the floor.

The voice of Brodhawk arose to encourage them, however, and they rallied for a determined effort. The rescuers seemed to be on all sides, though; even then, Rube Herndon realized that there were more men present than had come along the trail in his company.

He did not stop to count them; there was other work to do, and he fought manfully.

Yank was, as usual, the hero of the occasion. No outlaw could stand before him. Gladiator Gabe was busy, and his great strength told against the foe. And Sandy Whiskers, ever keeping near Ruth and Isabel, fought with a wild, headlong valor which made him noticeable even in the heat of the fight.

But it could not last forever. One moment the outlaws were there; the next the rescuers found foemen scarce; and then they had the place to themselves.

The outlaws were defeated; a decisive triumph had been secured.

Gabe and Rube gave their attention to the girls, who were almost at the point of fainting, and led them from the scene of battle to the small room once occupied by Yank.

It was a joyful reunion, but for a time conversation was incoherent—Isabel and Ruth could not at once recover from what they had witnessed.

When they were calmer, Gabe shook his partner's hand with almost boyish enthusiasm.

"We win in the end, old man!" he exclaimed.

"So I see, but I don't understand how. There are many mysteries, among which is—how in the world did you get into the Castle?"

"Climbed the cliff, gained the roof, made an opening, and took the enemy in the rear. It was an idea of my own."

"And a good one; but who was enough of a climber to scale the cliff?"

"I did it, somehow."

"A miraculous piece of work. Even Yank pronounced it unscalable."

"Oh, I didn't take the steepest part, at the nose of the rock, but a little to one side."

At that moment Mr. Ellis entered the room, and greeted his adopted daughters in an affecting manner. Close after him came Never-miss.

"I consait we've got 'em!" spoke the veteran, his face beaming with good-humor. "I told Brodhawk not ter be too sure, an' I'd put it stronger, only I didn't want 'em ter see I had any real hope. Ye see, when they tied me I sorter fooled 'em on the size o' my wrists—I've done the trick afore—an' when the proper time come, I had only ter cast off the bonds. Fust time I've b'en tied up fur some period, an' it made me feel egregious mean; but I consait the Yellowbird pedigree is cleared o' igenousity. Boys, ye fit like hurley! You did wal; you did very wal; you did most egregious wal, lads!"

"And the outlaws?" asked Rube.

"Gone, root an' branch."

"Are they all gone?"

"Exceptin' two pris'ners, all are gone. Some run away, an' some are gone a road I hope none o' us will ever tread. I'm sorry ter say that Parkman, Jackingham, Stealhoss, Brodhawk, an' others, are among the lively departed. My cross-eyed frien', Smith, is a pris'ner, which is cheerin' ter me—I've grown ter love his comp'ny, by hurley!"

Yank's eyes gleamed good-humoredly, and his face bore a quaint smile.

"Ef it wa'n't fur the twist in his eyes, an' the twist in his moral natur', that insex would be a rough gem!" he added.

"What of our friend, Sandy Whiskers?"

"Missin'."

"I hope he is not injured."

"I consait he has run away. Prob'ly he was onsartain how he'd be received."

The speaker glanced toward Isabel and Ruth.

"I can't think evil of him, after all he has done for us," declared Ruth.

"Nor I," added Isabel.

"He sartainly fought amazin' wal, an' I've always had a good opinion o' Sandy."

"He seemed to be almost wild for us to attack the Castle," stated Rocky Mountain Samson, "and I believe that the man means well."

"Yet," said Isabel, with manifest reluctance, "the past is very much against him. You heard what the man Steelblade said. Some one attempted the life of my uncle, Robert Bruce Rand. Suspicion fell upon my poor father, and though they could prove nothing against him, the charge disgraced him, made him an exile, and brought him prematurely to his grave. We know he was innocent, for he was the best of men; but he always suspected Peter Todd—the man you call Sandy Whiskers."

"I take it Sandy was a stranger ter you, or you would 'a' knowed him at Sassajack."

"He was a stranger, except by reputation."

"An' Stealhoss—how did he know about it?"

"Indeed I don't know."

"It may be wuth while ter investigate Stealhoss, an' as I ain't over-busy, p'raps I'll do it bime-by. Rube, lad, it's lucky you brung the rest o' our crowd hyar, fur things would otherwise have been egregious hot for us."

"It was no easy work to find the unlighted camp, but I did find it, and brought Gabe and the rest. Had I not left them somewhat behind, they would have been with me when I first entered the Castle. How they happened to arrive in such a timely way is for Gabe to tell."

"Ellis and his party joined us by a mere chance, and then I got the idea of climbing the

ledge. It was a hard pull, but I attacked it as far east as I dared. Once on top I lowered a rope to the rest, who then came up, and when we gained the top of the Castle by means of a rude ladder, made from a pine sapling with the limbs cut off a foot from the trunk, it was easy to make a hole in the roof, and we all entered. You kept the outlaws so busy they did not see us."

"You tell it simply and modestly, lad, but I kin see thar was an egregious amount o' hard work an' danger in it. Lucky you wa'n't killed by a fall."

"Gabe deserves all the praise," interrupted Ellis. "He risked his life heroically, and, to tell the truth, I wonder that he is alive to tell of it."

"Speaking on this toe-pick," pursued Yank, "reminds me o' the time at Arsenal City when I bought a plot in a graveyard. 'Twas wide an' roomy, the plot was, for I wa'n't mean enough ter begrudge myself plenty o' space fur my last sleep, but I found in the end that I'd tackled an expensive luxury. Taxes begun ter come in egregious—they did, by hurley! Nigh erbout ev'ry day the c'lector come 'round with a bill, an' it kep' my cash at low ebb. One day, when the tax-man 'peared, I looked the bill over an' sez I:

"'Whar'll this end?' sez I.

"'Whar'll what end?' sez he.

"'Taxes,' sez I. 'Ef you pile the 'arth onter me when I move inter my lot as heavy as you pile the taxes onter me now, thar'll be a commotion. Thar will, by hurley!' sez I.

"'Taxes must be kep' up,' sez he, frownin'.

"'They be up,' sez I.

"'Taxes are the bulwark o' the nation,' sez he.

"'I don't approve o' so much bulwark,' sez I.

"'You ain't public-speerited,' sez he.

"'I consait not,' sez I; 'I never drink speerits o' any sort. How fur,' sez I, 'does your joorisprudence distend in the matter o' taxes?'

"'All over Arsenal City,' sez he.

"'Not outside?' sez I.

"'Sartain not,' sez he.

"'All right,' sez I; 'glad ter know it. Bring 'round yer tax-bill ter-morrer,' sez I, 'an' a hoss an' cart, an' I'll disburse my superfluent wealth, an' you kin take it off in the cart. Ef taxes is the bulwark o' the nation, the nation sha'n't blame me ef it has a mean, low, lop-sided bulwark. Good-night.'

"I spoke plausible ter him, you notice, but thar was treason in my mind. That night, though I was suffrin' egregious with the new-r'ol'gy, I went out ter the graveyard, dug up my plot, an' carted the hull business away. The tax-man didn't git his bill paid, an' as I've kep' out o' sight ev' sence, he ain't b'en 'round ter harass me fur more bulwarks. I've got my plot stowed away safe, an' I don't see but the nation is gittin' along jest as wal as ever."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE MYSTERY OF GLADIATOR GABE.

SHERIFF BRADLEY entered the room.

"We've made another diskivery," he announced.

"What is it?" Yank asked.

"The outlaws hev ammunition enough stored ter supply an army."

The mountaineer was slow with his reply.

"Is thar a good 'eal o' powder?" he finally asked.

"Yes, ten kegs of it stored in a drift which runs under the whole building. It is probably a secret passage to be used in an emergency."

"I'll see it!" decided Yank.

He went out with Bradley, but returned in a few minutes. His face bore a satisfied expression.

"It's my opinion that we owe the egregious gang a good-by complement," he said. "I hev proposed ter the sheriff that we use the powder, an' give Rock Castle a sky-lift. What is the idee o' the rest on ye?"

There was but one opinion. It was known that Brodhawk and his men were, one and all, desperadoes; that they were in the habit of making forays for booty against honest men whenever and wherever they could; and that Rock Castle was the lair to which they fell back after these forays.

Plainly, it would be a blessing to the whole region if the lair was forever destroyed.

There was no dissenter to this opinion, and preparations were at once begun. Under the direction of Yank and Bradley the powder was strewn from keg to keg, along this under-the-ground passage, and a fuse carefully arranged to a line of the powder leading to the floor above.

No haste was made to leave the place. Day had dawned, and a plentiful breakfast was provided for all from the outlaws' stores. Everybody was in good spirits. The rescuers had no desperately-wounded men upon their hands, and those who were injured bore their troubles philosophically.

Their triumph had been so decisive that they had recompense for their wounds.

Some efforts were made to find Sandy Whiskers, but there was no trace of him. There was a difference of opinion as to how he

had gone. Some of the rescuers believed that he was hiding somewhere, severely wounded; while others thought that he had run away in good condition.

As usual, there were still some who would not admit any good of the man.

When Yank had seen his party somewhat rested the Castle was vacated. Yank and Bradley were the last to go; they remained long enough to fire the fuse, which they did, and at once all hurried to a safe distance, and then, pausing, waited in an expectant state.

Nor had they long to wait.

Suddenly a deep roar burst upon their ears; then the Castle seemed to rise in the air—a moment, and then it was shattered into ten thousand fragments, which shot downward and crashed through the tree-tops, with a terrific noise.

Rock Castle was a thing of the past! and only a shapeless ruin remained of the building erected with so much care and labor. Half of the material had been blown off the rock, and the remainder was in a disordered heap.

"It never'll be built up ag'in," said Never-miss. "A new house would cost more work than the old, owin' ter the ruins, an', besides, Brodhawk's secret is now knowed."

"He must be full of fury," observed Bradley.

"To be sure; an' it wouldn't s'prise me an' artom ef we heerd from him ag'in. He's a revengeful critter, as I kin plainly see. Sassajack will want ter keep her eyes wide open, fur ef he j'ines hands with Parkman, Jackingham an' Stealhoss, they kin do an egregious heap o' mischief."

"I shall never forgive myself that I didn't hand Parkman an' Jackingham over ter the lynchers that night, an' hev 'em wound up fur good," lamented the sheriff.

"I consait it would 'a' b'en a good deed, but, as a sheriff, thar would 'a' b'en a flaw on your pedigree."

"It'd saved a heap o' trouble."

"No doubt."

"When we git home, I'm goin' ter resign," affirmed Bradley, "an' ef they come sneakin' 'round ag'in, I'll nominate myself Jedge Lynch. But they won't come, I'm afeerd."

"Don't lose no sleep as ter that," Yank soberly returned. "It's my idee we shall hear from 'em in a way we won't like. An' now let me rej'ne our party an' git away."

They went, and the return to Golden Moon Valley was begun.

During the following week nothing occurred which need be related in detail.

When the rescue-party reached Sassajack the various persons settled down to their old life. Smith, the cross-eyed outlaw, and his fellow-prisoner were sent away where they could be properly tried by law, and there was little danger that they would miss getting their deserts.

Gabe and Rube resumed work on Claim 21, with Yank as their guest, but Claim 22 stood silent and deserted. Parkman and Jackingham would never dig gold there again.

Up in the gulch was another deserted shanty—Sandy Whiskers's. He had neither been seen nor heard from, which statement will also apply to Tecumseh Tubbs and Sybilla.

Apparently Sassajack had entered upon a new period of quiet prosperity, but when the opinion of Yank Yellowbird was asked, he did not confirm such a sanguine theory.

"Thar are atrocious insex who hev a grudge ag'in' us," he would say, as he gravely stroked his sparse beard, "an' ef they don't make a move ter git square, I ain't no prophesyer."

There was something besides this to worry Rube Herndon. He saw that Gladiator Gabe was in trouble. In some way, Sybilla was mixed up with the young Samson's life, and her absence gave him a measure of relief; but even that could not dispel the gloom which often settled heavily upon him.

Curiously enough, these moody periods were the most noticeable after he had returned from a visit to Isabel Rand.

With all the evidence before him Rube would have been dull if he had failed to suspect that Sybilla had some hold upon Gabe, but the latter made no statement. The nearest he had come to divulging was the admission that the ring found in the shanty had probably been Sybilla's, and that the night intruder was, most likely, Tecumseh Tubbs.

Remembering Gabe's agitation at sight of the ring, it was impossible to doubt that Sybilla appeared as the evil genius of his life.

One day, when Gabe and Rube were working together, Mr. Ellis called upon them. They suspended work and fell into conversation. The visitor had not come without an object, and he soon made it known.

"I've run away, to-day," he finally said, smiling. "Isabel and Ruth would probably give me a lecture if they knew why I am here."

"I hope you have no evil intentions upon us," replied Rube, lightly.

"Hardly—my intentions are of the best kind, as I will try to prove. I hope you will pardon the interference of an old man like me, but I would like to say a word in regard to you two gentlemen and Isabel and Ruth."

"Say it, by all means," Rube replied. "The girls are your adopted nieces—why shouldn't you speak?"

"Suppose I should dismiss you and Gabe?"

"We should then carry the case to a higher court—the young ladies themselves."

"It strikes me the case has been carried to a court," already," dryly replied Ellis. "Excuse such a bad pun, and let me speak seriously. I have received news from the East."

"Not bad news, I hope."

"No, quite the contrary. I have fallen heir to a small sum of money—but large enough so that my wife and I will obey the call that tells us our presence is necessary in Illinois."

"And leave Sassajack?"

"Yes. Perhaps you see now why I have come to you, to-day. It seems highly desirable that there should be a double wedding before Mrs. Ellis and I go."

Rube's face brightened. It was clear that he and the speaker would not differ on this point. Then Ellis glanced toward Gabe Dix, but the latter had suddenly averted his face.

"Your views are eminently sound," promptly replied Herndon.

"And what has Gabriel Dix to say?"

The answer came slowly, while Gabe looked at the distant hills without seeing an object there.

"You are very kind, Mr. Ellis," he replied.

"I thought I should have you two on my side. I have not yet spoken to Ruth and Isabel on the subject, thinking it best to leave that to you, but I cannot leave Sassajack without knowing that they have good protectors."

"It is certainly the best way," Rube agreed.

"Very good," said Ellis, rising. "I'll go now, but a word to the wise is sufficient; I leave you to do the rest. You have a fortnight in which to settle the affair."

The speaker waved his hand cheerily and walked away.

Rube turned to his friend. He had observed, if Ellis had not, that the young giant's manner was strange, and his still-averted face was not encouraging.

"Well, Gabe?" said Herndon, hesitatingly.

Rocky Mountain Samson turned upon him fiercely.

"It is not well!" he vehemently declared.

"Gabe, what is wrong?"

"Everything is wrong, and I most of all. The double wedding will not take place. I am more likely to be in my grave than at any wedding!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

SOMETHING FOR SALE.

GLADIATOR GABE uttered the words in a despairing voice, and as he spoke, he pressed his hands to his head as though to seek relief from a pain which gnawed sharply there.

Rube laid his hand gently upon his partner's arm.

"Old friend," he said, pityingly, "I am sorry to see you in this mood. I do not know what is wrong, but can't I help you?"

"Nobody can help me."

"Is it as bad as that?"

"It is as bad as it can be."

"Is Isabel a sharer in your trouble?"

"She may be, yet."

"You do not care less for her than you did?"

"Less!" echoed Gabe, wildly; "I worship her!"

"And there is an obstacle between you?"

"Yes."

"Partner, I do not seek to intrude upon your secret, but, sometimes, two heads are better than one. Possibly I can help you."

It was an appeal more earnest than his choice of words indicated. Nobody knew better than Rube that while Rocky Mountain Samson was as brave as a lion, he was not one of the most resolute and far-seeing men in the social affairs of life.

"Nobody can help me," Gabe repeated, drearily.

"Will this mystery interfere with Mr. Ellis's idea of a double wedding?"

"Isabel Rand will never be my wife!" Gabe declared, almost fiercely.

"Yet, you say that you love her—"

"In Heaven's name, don't harass me!" the young miner vehemently cried. "Can't you see that I am suffering the torments of the lost? I am lost—I am forever lost! Isabel will never be my wife, but within the fortnight spoken of by Ellis I may find a grave!"

"Gabe! what do you mean by that?"

"A revolver will end all my troubles!"

"Be still! Why do you speak such words? You have my sincerest sympathy, but it is weak for a strong man like you to talk of—suicide. It is the resort of those weak both in body and mind. Men call you 'Samson.' Will the title fit one who talks as you do? There, forgive me, old friend: I did not mean to be harsh."

"You were sensible, which I was not," replied Dix, his face flushing. "Believe me, the weakness was only temporary, but—I am in sore trouble. Wait! Say no more now, Rube, but let me go away by myself. When I return, I will be calmer. I will talk with you then."

Herndon did not oppose the plan. Gabe showed

newly-awakened firmness, and all might yet be well. It was best that he should have time to overcome himself—to think.

Rube saw him go with a degree of hope.

Straight toward the timber Gabe bent his steps—the same place where he had encountered Sybilla that night when he first saw her in Golden Moon Valley. There he believed he would be alone, free to review the past and consider the future.

He found himself mistaken.

He had gone a hundred yards beyond the edge of the timber when a man stepped from behind a tree and stood almost in his path.

It was Tecumseh Tubbs.

The unexpected encounter caused Gabe to forget his own affairs for a moment. He only remembered that Tubbs was one of the men who, as a friend of Brodhawk, would not be tolerated at Sassajack, and a frown appeared on his face.

The man from Arkansas, however, smiled and bowed in a very friendly way.

"Now this is what I call lucky," he observed.

"You are jest the man I want to see, young feller."

"I can't return the compliment," curtly replied Dix.

"Don't try; I don't need compliments. I kin stan' on my own pegs. I'm from Arkansas, I be; an' I'm a terror o' big size. I come of a family half-grizzly, half-catamount an' half-rattlesnake, an' I kin fight like sin when I set out. Down my way we larn ter use the rifle afore we're two months old, an' at six our chief 'musement is ter take alligators by the tail an' snap their heads off. I'm a blizzard in a dynamite shell, I be!"

"If you are done with your idiotic remarks, I will remind you that, if you are covetous of a fight, you can find your man by going to the village yonder. They want you there; everybody does, from the youngest child up to Judge Lynch."

"Hol' on!" hastily cried Tecumseh; "I ain't hyar ter harm anybody now; I'm on a message o' peace. I'm hyar ter see you."

"To see me?"

"So I said."

"What business have you with me?"

"You needn't be so short an' ugly about it; Arkansas men don't skeer. I've suthin' ter sell you, I be."

"I shall not buy."

"Don't be so fast, old man; you may bite off a claw you won't a'prove of. Now, let's hev a new deal an' set ourselves right. Do you s'pose I'm hyar ter hold a love-feast? Not a bit on't; I'm come on biz, an' it's to your good ter hear me sound my warble."

Gabe made an impatient gesture.

"Go on."

"Firstly, I hev news."

"What news?"

"Of a woman."

Gabe looked hard at the speaker. He suspected that he was to meet some trick or imposition, but it was as well to listen and have it over.

"What woman?" he asked.

"Name o' Sybilla."

"What of her?"

"She's off on the home-stretch."

"Do you mean that she has left Montana?"

Tecumseh chuckled.

"She has, fur sure."

"I don't believe it. If she had gone, you would have gone also."

"With her?"

"Yes."

"Egad! not I. The road she took ain't the road I want ter travel, though we're all bound ter gallop that way, sooner or later. My choice is fur 'later.' In a word, pard, Sybilla is dead!"

The announcement was stoically made. It brought a look of contempt to Gladiator Gabe's face.

"What trick are you and the woman playing now?" he sternly asked.

"Nary trick; Sybilla is dead. You see, when the disturbance took place hyar, we 'lowed that Golden Moon Valley wa'n't the safest place fur us; so we up an' went ter a lonely place in the mountain, an' sorter took up a livin'-claim in a cave. All would 'a' gone wal of a rattlesnake hadn't ben prev'us squatter—he was, an' resentin' intrusion, he bit Sybilla an' died—she died, I mean. That settled the hull biz, an' I buried her up in the woods, a'p'inted myself executress o' her affairs, an' hyar I be with somethin' ter sell ter close out the estate."

"What new trick is this?" Gabe sternly asked.

"Eh?"

"This is all a lie, and I know it. The woman is not dead, but you are carrying out some order of hers, designed to lure me into a trap."

Tubbs stared at Gabe with a stupid expression.

"I reckon I've failed ter be plain," he said, dubiously, "though I can't see bow. Mebbe, though, I kin satisfy ye that she has gone on the last road. When I'd seen her laid away fur her long sleep I looked over her vally'bles. Only one thing did I find which was o' any consequence, but it struck me that it was wu'th some-

thin'. I've brought it; it's fur sale; mebbe you'll buy. Look at it."

He had drawn a faded document from his pocket, and with a quick motion he now spread it out before Rocky Mountain Samson.

A marriage certificate!

Gabe started violently. His eyes grew large—wondering—almost startled. He looked at the names of the contracting parties. Gabriel Dix and Sybilla Handiboel!

"Let me see it!" he exclaimed, hoarsely.

"You may, but, mind ye, no tricks. Back o' the dockment is a revolver an' T. Tubbs. Don't try ter git it by unfair means, fur I'm half-grizzly—"

"Be still! I am no thief, and would not dream of taking it by force. Let me see it, and you shall have it back unharmed."

"I take yer word; an Arkansas gent knows an honest man when he sees him, an' I was well brung up."

The paper was passed over, and then Tecumseh thrust his hands into his pockets, walked a few feet away, and stood softly whistling some tune known only to himself. He did not fail to watch Gabe keenly, though slyly, as he did so, and there was much to reward him.

The young miner read with deep interest—painful interest, it seemed, and then, when the words were no longer a matter of doubt, seemed to redouble his application to the document.

His face expressed anxiety, doubt, eagerness, and hope.

It was several minutes before he again turned to Tubbs.

"Have you told the truth about this paper?"

"I hev, upon my word."

"And Sybilla is dead?"

"Yes."

Keenly Gabe studied the fellow's face. The news seemed almost beyond belief, yet there was the certificate to speak for itself, and its evidence seemed indisputable.

"And you wish to sell this article?"

"That's the idee. It ain't wu'th nothin' ter me, 'cept what it'll bring. Sybilla is gone, an' you are the only person interested. Money is my game; I'm ready ter sell the paper. Be you ready ter buy?"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

SHADOWS OF TROUBLE.

ROCKY MOUNTAIN SAMSON did not at once reply. He was too full of hope and excitement to deal coolly then; the news he had heard seemed too good to be true. In his calmer moments he would have seen something wrong in exulting over the death of a human being, but he saw nothing of the kind then; Sybilla had been the evil genius of his life, and, now that she was dead the last obstacle between him and Isabel Rand was removed.

Now that she was dead!

He drew a short, sharp breath, and Tubbs had to repeat his last question before it was heard.

"What is your price for the paper?" he then asked.

"I reckon it's worth a hundred dollars ter you," Tecumseh answered.

The sum was less than Gabe had expected, but he would not close the bargain at once.

"You forgot that, now the woman is dead, the paper is valueless," he returned.

"But I'm short o' funds."

"Say fifty dollars, and I will buy it."

Tecumseh plunged his hands into his pockets again, and seemed to meditate deeply.

"It's a bargain," he said, after a pause.

"Very well. I must return to the shanty for the money, but I will come here again in less than half an hour and pay you."

"All right. Give me the document, an' I'll set under this tree an' smoke the pipe o' peace while you are gone. O' course you won't tell nobody that T. Tubbs is nigh?"

"I will not. Wait here, and I will not try your patience greatly."

Gabe hurried away, and Tubbs lighted his pipe and sat down as he said. There was a sly, treacherous twinkle in his eyes, and when, after Samson had disappeared, Steelblade, the Knife-Thrower, came out from behind an adjacent tree, the man from Arkansas did not look surprised in the least.

"Aha! Master Tubbs," quoth Steelblade, "this is very good luck."

"Prime!" answered Tubbs. "Dunno how we happened ter hev the good luck to run onter him fu'st pop."

"Our guardian demon is helping us, master."

"Hope he'll keep it up."

"I think he will."

"I wa'n't ter see our little woman win the game."

The Knife-Thrower's eyes went into ambush at once, and from the cover he looked craftily at Tubbs.

"It's natural you should, master."

"Eh?" gruffly returned Tubbs.

"I am not blind, Master Tubbs, and I know that our fair Sybilla is dear to you."

"Pshaw! Nonsense!"

Tecumseh spoke as though the idea was superlatively absurd, but he was plainly disconcerted.

"It does not matter, master. Nothing so trifling matters if we but beat those proud folks of Sassajack and have our revenge. Revenge! 'Bright Eyes' is hungry for it—the darling!"

He drew his murderous-looking knife and, fixing his keen gaze on the tree-top above his head, flung the weapon upward. Unerringly aimed, as usual, it cut a selected twig neatly off, and, as they descended, he caught both knife and twig.

"Great is 'Bright Eyes'!" he somberly said; "and when she strikes for a human heart, she will not fail."

"Put up yer infernal knife!" growled Tubbs, with a shiver. "You make my blood cold. I am good deal of a rascal, but you go me one better. Talk about your demon!—you are all that, yourself, an' I b'lieve you are leagued with the Evil One!"

Steelblade laughed softly, kissed the blade of "Bright Eyes," and then returned the weapon to his belt.

"I will to cover now, for nothing must alarm our gentle Master Dix. He might turn pale at sight of my pet."

He touched the knife and began to retreat. Tecumseh looked after him and shook his head gravely. Bad as the man was, he saw evil in the Knife-Thrower which surpassed his own capabilities and worried him.

He knew not at what moment the swarthy-faced man might send "Bright Eyes" flying toward a heart highly valued by Tecumseh Tubbs—his own.

Gladiator Gabe did not keep him waiting. He soon returned, and the bargain was consummated. Tubbs received his fifty dollars, and the marriage certificate passed into Gabe's hands. Then they separated, and the miner walked away with a happier expression than he had borne for many a day.

Tecumseh looked equally satisfied. He departed in an opposite direction, and was soon joined by Steelblade. The two went due north, and talked in high spirits. They appeared to regard the bargain with Dix as a great triumph.

A mile from Sassajack was a valley containing about one acre. Bluffs surrounded it, rocky and almost destitute of vegetation, but in the valley were large trees and plenty of undergrowth.

To a certain point in this valley went the two men, as though by previous understanding, and as they came to a halt, a woman stepped from cover and confronted them.

Sybilla! Sybilla, as well and strong as ever, and full of virile aggressiveness, albeit a trifle of anxiety was now expressed on her face.

"Well!"

"Done!"

The question, quick and eager, from her; the reply, terse but satisfied, from Tecumseh Tubbs. "Have you really done the work?" she continued.

Tubbs exhibited the fifty dollars.

"I have this; Dix has the paper," he answered.

"Then he fell into the trap!"

"Like a silly fish."

Sybilla laughed shortly, triumphantly.

"By Jove! the dear Gabriel will yet prove my best friend. He plays right into my hand. Dear boy! how I love him!"

Tecumseh's face darkened.

"I love him too well to let him live in this cold, cruel world," added Sybilla, smiling upon her burly associate.

Tecumseh's face cleared.

"To speak more sensibly," added the woman, seriously, "I am delighted to hear this news. Thank you, Tecumseh, a thousand times. But I really did not think Dixy would be so easily taken in. Tell me all about it, Mr. Tubbs."

He obeyed, and as Sybilla had put him in good spirits, the story lost nothing by the telling. He represented Gabe as wholly deceived—which was not far from the case—and represented himself as a marvelously-skillful diplomatist—which was less accurate.

"You have done nobly," Sybilla commented, "and our man is fully in our power. I will have a revenge which will make him wish himself dead. He's proud, the old man is, and this, with the extinction of his last hope of happiness, will ruin the man."

"He deserves it," Tubbs declared.

"Right you are, my boy!"

With this off-hand reply, Sybilla glanced at the sun and added:

"Now go to the hut, Tecumseh, and make ready for our departure."

"Kerect."

The Arkansaw man went, and Sybilla turned to Steelblade.

"Are you a discreet man, sir?"

"Mistress," replied he, with humility, "I am a humble man, but I can keep a secret well."

"You are no fool, at any rate," said Sybilla, laughing. "Here is a gold coin. Take it, let me question you, and remain silent to others."

"Death could not force me to speak, mistress."

"Good! Now what of this outlaw leader—Brodhawk? Is he handsome?"

"As a demon, mistress."

"Dark or fair?"

"Dark."

"Good! Tall? Well-formed?"

"Both, mistress."

"How old?"

"Nearly forty."

"Excellent! I hate insipid youngsters; I hate fair men; I hate small men. And this Brodhawk—is he a man with eyes?"

"He knows a beautiful woman when he sees her, mistress."

"Better yet!" cried Sybilla, laughing. "I have vast curiosity to see this wilderness chief. Thank you, Steelblade; and now, mind you! not a word of this to any one, least of all, to Tubbs."

"Mistress, I am dumb!" declared the Knife-Thrower, bowing servilely.

"Once more, good. Here comes the valorous Arkansaw braggart, and now we will get away. Ho! for Brodhawk's lair! There will we lie low for a time. We have given Gabe Dix a rope to hang himself, and, mark my words, he will do it. Watch me well, gents, a glorious revenge and victory is before me!"

Steelblade's evil eyes went into ambush.

"I, too, mistress, have some little items of work to do," he said softly, as his hand mechanically wandered to "Bright Eyes."

At Claim 21, there was a scene which showed in sharp contrast to the one last recorded.

When Rube abandoned work and returned to the shanty, he found Gabe at work on supper. As Herndon went near the fire, a cluster of ashes floated away from the blaze and fell by his feet. He noticed idly that they were those of some burned paper—possibly, he thought, Gladiator Gabe had been destroying an old letter.

The latter glanced through the door and saw Yank Yellowbird approaching.

"Rube," said the big miner, hurriedly, "one word with you before Yank comes. Are you going to see Ruth, to-night?"

"That is my intention."

"I will accompany you. I want to thank Mr. Ellis, and tell him that I am in favor of the double wedding coming off at once. I think, when Isabel is my wife, I shall know what happiness is for the first time in my life."

His face was bright with happiness. Rube looked at him sharply, wondering at this sudden change of opinion, but the entrance of Yank put an end to the conversation.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

SANDY WHISKERS.

ONE day later.

Sassajack had something new to talk about. It was generally known that Mr. Ellis was going East to attend to business, and that he was likely to bid Golden Moon Valley a permanent farewell; and that, before he went, he was to give his adopted daughters to new protectors.

Isabel and Ruth were to become the wives of Gabe Dix and Rube Herndon, respectively. A double wedding was to occur, and there was to be a general invitation.

Some of the miners heard this with secret pain, for the fortunate men were not the only ones who had aspired to win the sisters; but of late, Rube and Gabe had seemed to have the battle won, and those who had failed were not surprised.

Hope being gone, they accepted the inevitable as well as possible, and prepared to give the young couples a hearty send-off when they started in their new spheres.

That afternoon Herndon and Dix called upon the girls, and then the four went to walk.

Among those who saw them go was Yank Yellowbird. The mountaineer stroked his beard and smiled significantly.

"It's the way o' boys an' gals," he observed to himself. "They tend ter matrimony when friv'lous youth is over, jest as cows make fur the barn when the summer season is past an' grazin' gits poor. Wal, wal, I s'pose it's all right, fur 'tain't the way o' many ter like joggin' along in life alone. Man is only a weak critter anyhow, an' comfortin' words cheer him up egregious. I'll stay ter this weddin', an' then, ef thar ain't no sign o' Parkman an' his crew, poke along fur pastures new an' other fields. My feet hev a longin' ter be on the tramp."

He glanced down at the members in question. "They've kerried me over an atrocious 'mount o' ground, them feet has; an' never a corn hev they took onder them, ter turn my mind ter gall an' bitterness. Pooty fair sort o' feet, they be, ef one is a weak sister when danger's around."

The mountaineer shouldered his rifle and walked toward the timber.

The course of the young people was at right angles with his own. Of these four the gayest was Gabe Dix, and Isabel, who had not been oblivious of his recent periods of moodiness, was correspondingly pleased. He showed unusual light-heartedness, and developed a vein of humor which made the girls laugh frequently.

Rube, however, was perplexed. Gabe had not confided in him at all, and his radical buoyancy of spirits, following close after the inter-

view in which he had declared that Isabel could never be his wife, and had hinted at suicide, was remarkable and puzzling, to say the least.

Despite all, the whole party enjoyed that afternoon, and they only turned back toward the village when the sun warned them that the supper-hour was near at hand.

They were nearly out of the wood, and at a point where the trees were few and scattered, when their peaceful mood was rudely interrupted.

Something whistled past Rube's ear as he walked by Ruth's side, and she gave a sudden start. Then the crack of a rifle sounded sharply. Rube's gaze followed a flying object to the ground. There lay a lock of hair, freshly cut from Ruth's head.

He knew what had severed it—a bullet!

He wheeled toward the quarter from whence had sounded the shot, and this is what he saw: A hundred yards away stood a man near a large tree, as though it had lately sheltered him. He was looking eagerly toward them, one hand raised to shield his eyes from the light, while in the other hand he held a rifle.

"Sandy Whiskers!"

The name broke from Rube's lips as he recognized the man with the rifle, and then hot indignation flashed over him. Before he could say more, however, still another person came running toward them.

It was Sheriff Bradley, and his face was flushed an angry red.

"'Twas him did it—Sandy Whiskers!" the sheriff cried. "He's ketched in the act, this time, an', by the Eternal, the critter won't git off ag'in!"

He bounded toward the lone miner, but, no sooner had his intention become manifest, than Sandy Whiskers turned and darted away at full speed. Bradley sent a hoarse shout after him, and then strained every nerve to cut down the intervening distance.

Herndon started to follow, but Ruth caught his arm.

"No, no!" she exclaimed. "Don't go; don't leave us. Your place is here."

Rube glanced toward the running men. It was plain to his practiced eyes that Bradley was gaining, and he decided to obey Ruth's request. He bent and picked up the curl.

"An inch more to the right and it would have been your life," he said, in an unsteady voice. "For now I will do as you say, but if, as seems certain, that man has attempted your life, there shall be no mercy for him!"

Two hours later.

Night had fallen, and out in the timber was a scene calculated to thrill an observer. The darkness had been partially overcome by a score of torches, held in the hands of as many men. These men were the miners of Sassajack, and every face was stern and threatening as they crowded around one spreading tree.

The central figures of the group were two men.

One was Bradley, angry and excited, the other was Sandy Whiskers. And the life of the lone miner was in peril. Around his neck was a rope, and the other end, carried over a limb, was held by the miners. Bonds were on Sandy Whiskers's limbs, and the occasion was easy to understand.

That most terrible of gatherings—the assembly of Judge Lynch—ruled the hour.

It seemed to be an unjust fatality, or a retributive Providence—who shall say which?—which brought this man so often into one certain peril. Thrice within the past month had his fellow-beings attempted to take his life with the rope—a means of death which even law should be ashamed to use.

"I want all hyar ter understand clearly," said Bradley, in a loud voice. "We mean to wind up this man's career fur good cause. I'm at the head o' the move, but let no man criticise me; I've resigned my office as sheriff, an' am a private citizen. As fur the prisner, I'll state his case, passin' over our doubts o' the feller in the past."

"Ter-day I was walkin' in the timber when the shot was fired at the Rand girl. The minute I seen she wasn't hurt I looked beyend. Thar stood Sandy Whiskers, rifle in hand, shadin' his eyes with his free hand an' lookin' eagerly ter see the result o' his shot. It was clear as mud that he meant ter kill her."

"I chased the villain, ketched him, an' hyar he is."

"Now, gents, I reckon it is time fur uster deal with the varmint as he deserves. We've b'en altergether too easy with him before. Ever sence he come ter Sassajack he has been kickin' up one row arter another, an' it's time ter stop it. He's an out-an'-out scoundrel, as you kin all see."

"I'm in favor o' Jedge Lynch in this case, fur we'd saved a pile o' trouble in the past ef we had given Lynch the reins. I've opposed it, I'm ashamed ter say, but I'm on the right side this time."

"Herndon an' Dix, as usual, are dead against Judge Lynch, but them chaps are good fellows enough, an' their extra sensitiveness is owin' ter bad bringin' up. They've got the wrong tip, an'

gone up west ter stop our jubilee, so they can't interfere here.

"Now, gents, is thar one hyar who says Sandy Whiskers don't deserve hangin'?"

Nobody answered.

"Who thinks he ought ter be hung?"

There was a roar of voices.

"Good! I'm glad ter see ye so sensible. Now, gents, give the pris'ner a word ef he wants it. Hev ye anything ter say afore ye go off, Sandy Whiskers?"

"Not much," was the slow, humble reply, "Luck is dead ag'in' me, an' as I don't amount ter nothin', nohow, I reckon I may as well be hung. This much I do say, though: I'm innercent o' the charge made ag'in' me. It wa'n't me fired at the girl."

A jeering chorus rose from the lynchers, but it did not disturb the lone miner. He had abandoned hope of life, and his thoughts were bent more on the unknown future than the wretched present.

"The shot came from 'way beyond me," he went on, almost mechanically. "I was watchin' the young folks, an', when I seen the disturbance, I thought a tragedy had happened. Then I stepped out from kiver ter look clos'ter, an' 'twas then I was seen; but I sw'ar that I did not fire the shot!"

Another jeering chorus from the miners.

"We've heerd enough o' that sort," commented the ex-sheriff. "Ef ye won't own up, we won't coax ye. Make ready, men! When I call out the word 'Three,' pull on the rope. Now! One, two—"

"Stop the exercises!" interrupted a commanding voice. "Don't be triflin' with the multiplication-table, mister, fur mathematics is a most egregious tough subje' ter wrestle with."

And there stood Yank Yellowbird, with Dix and Herndon at his back. They had pushed through the crowd unnoticed.

"What're you hyar fur?" Bradley angrily cried.

"Mister," quoth Nevermiss, shaking his long forefinger at the ex-sheriff, "we're hyar ter save ye from makin' an atrocious insex o' yerself. We're hyar ter save Sandy."

An angry chorus from the crowd.

"Sarve him the same way ef he interferes!" cried a burly miner.

Yank grounded his rifle with a thump. He drew his always well-balanced figure more erect, and looked at the lynchers with unquailing eyes.

"Whar is the man who wants ter sarve me with a rope?" he demanded, steadily. "Let the egregious critter show up! Move him for'rud! I'm a man o' painful a'flections an' jumpin' new-ro'gy, but ef thar is anybody nigh who wants ter give me a rope, jest let him step up an' let me be introduced!"

Not once did the mountaineer raise his voice, but its usual mildness had, in a measure, given place to sternness, and his steady gray eyes made the lynchers feel uncomfortable.

"Hold on! hold on!" exclaimed Bradley.

"That threat was an idle one. O' course nobody would te'ch you, Yank, fur we all like ye—are afeerd on ye, too, I reckon, ef it come ter that—but, really, do ye think it right ter interfere fur a guilty man?"

"Do you think it right ter hang an innercent man?" retorted Nevermiss, quickly.

"But Sandy Whiskers is guilty."

Yank looked at the ex-sheriff and shook his head gravely and pityingly.

"I s'pose I ought ter be easy with them not used ter wood-raft," he said, in his old, mild manner, "but thar is a degree o' stupidity which is guilt—thar is, by hurley! When you ketched Sandy, was his rifle loaded or empty?"

Bradley looked confused.

"Wal, it—a—it was loaded, but he had had time ter load it arter firin'."

"No, he hadn't—not much!—an' ef you're any way a fair man, you'll admit it. Your eyes was on him all the time from two seconds arter the shot ontill you ketched him. A muzzle-loadin' rifle can't be filled up in two seconds. I consait that is proof he is innercent, an' now I'll tell ye who fired the shot. I've b'en doin' an artom o' woodcraft work, ye see."

The speaker produced a lump of battered lead.

"Thar's the bullet. Arter passin' the gal it lodged in a tree, an' I dug it out. I'll leave it ter any fair-minded man ter say ef a bullet o' that size could be got inter as small a bore as that in Sandy's rifle."

Silence followed this point, but the miners were beginning to waver. Yank's judgment and veracity were not to be disputed; they all knew that, if they would not say so.

"Next," pursued the mountaineer, "I'll produce the man who *did* fire the shot. He ain't no would-be slayer, neither. He was out huntin'; he fired at a bear; he missed, an' it was his bullet which went singin' past the young folks. Sandy said the bullet come from 'way beyond him, an' it did. The man who fired didn't s'pect the damage he nigh-about done, but he, too, has helped look it up, an' he's satisfied that 'twas his bullet."

Mr. Ellis stepped to Yank's side.

"I am the man referred to," he added. "I hope you won't doubt my word when I say that

I am convinced that it was my chance shot which so nearly killed a girl I dearly love."

There was another brief silence. The miners looked thoroughly ashamed; they were convinced to a man. Bradley set a good example.

"I'm a darnation fool!" he frankly confessed, "an' arter this I won't try ter be a leader in anything. Boys, our folly has nearly cost Sandy Whiskers his life. Le's all unite in askin' his pardon!"

And he sprung forward and cast the rope from the lone miner's neck with hearty good will.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

AN INTERRUPTED WEDDING.

THE lynchers had gone. They were one and all of the opinion that their room was better than their company, and, after apologies more or less humble, they slipped quietly away.

Only Yank, Rube, Gabe and Mr. Ellis remained with Sandy Whiskers. The latter maintained the same dull calmness which had marked his manner when his life was in danger. He had thanked his rescuers gratefully, but there was a dullness in all he said and did which led Rube to wonder if repeated shocks had not injured his mind.

His present companions were somewhat at a loss what to do with him; they had heard the story of the past more fully from Ruth and Isabel—that part outlined by Steelblake at Rock Castle—and they were not prepared to believe him a man whom they wanted with them.

He was still a riddle—and the past was very much against him.

He relieved them of all embarrassment. Having duly thanked them, he pointed to the heart of the wood.

"I am going now," he announced.

"May I ask where?" inquired Ellis.

"I don't know."

The speaker's gaze fell to the ground: his expression was troubled and uncertain; and then he looked back to Ellis.

"I hev work ter do," he added.

"I hope you'll do it well," returned Ellis, somewhat bluntly.

"I shall try, anyhow, an' you may yit know me as I be," was the labored reply.

"I hope you don't regard me as an enemy?"

"No—oh! no; you are a good man; too good ter sech an unworthy wretch as me."

Sandy Whiskers paused, passed his hand over his forehead in a confused way, and then, before more could be said, turned abruptly away.

"Good-by!" he added; and then hastened away with long steps.

"A singular man!" murmured Ellis.

"Egregious funny!" Yank agreed.

"I don't believe he is right mentally."

"I consait it's only his way. He's an artom weak-minded, is Sandy; an' of a low rank in life. Then he's odd as hurley. Reminds me o' the time I went ter see a young woman when I's just buddin' out at my full size. She challenged me ter play fox-an'-geese, an' then brung out a board an' s'plained the game, which we was ter play with a dozen or fifteen black beans an' one sol'tary kernel o' corn."

"Them is the geese," sez she, p'intin' ter the beans.

"I don't fancy black geese," sez I.

"Don't you worry," sez she; "I'm ter be the geese."

"All right," sez I.

"You're the fox," sez she.

"Don't think I'll make a good one; I never robbed a henroost in my life," sez I.

"You're the fox, sez she, with more emphasis than seemed necessary. 'You're rep'sented by the kernel o' corn, an' I'm goin' ter try an' pen you. You must try ter ketch me.'

"She looked at me in a funny way as she said it, an' I thought she blushed an artom."

"Le's be plain," sez I. "That air melancholy kernel o' corn wants ter ketch them black beans, does he?"

"Yes," sez she.

"Wal," sez I, "he's goin' ter try, but ef them egregious geese don't eat the kernel o' corn, fu'st t'ing, I ain't no prophesyer."

"We went at it, but, land o' Goshen! I couldn't tell the least thing about the atrocious game, an' I soon got so mixed up that I didn't know whether I's the fox or the geese. She set me right sev'ral times, an' with her help I ketched two geese—leastways, the kernel o' corn did—but she finally got egregious out o' patience."

"Why don't ye do better?" sez she.

"Tain't in me," sez I.

"Why don't ye ketch me?" sez she.

"Dunno, unless I ain't cut out fur a fox."

"You're a reg'lar goose," sez she, disconsolately. "Now, I wouldn't play with any other gentleman, but I'd jest as soon you would ketch me as not. I like you."

"You do?" sez I, cheerin' up.

"Ever so much," sez she, slidin' her hand inter mine.

"Better'n you do any one else?" sez I.

"Yes," sez she, in a tragic whisper.

"That settles it," sez I, jumpin' up. "Ef you hev friendly feelin's fur me, I ain't goin' ter 'low

no fox ter steal your geeze. I'll take keer o' this egregious fox!" sez I.

"With that I ketched up the kernel o' corn, bolted out o' the house an' went home. Now comes the funny part. Next time I met that air feminine she wouldn't speak ter me, an' never has sence, though what she was mad about I dunno. Egregious funny folks thar be in the world!"

It was the night of the grand double wedding, and the hall of Pierre Ayot's hotel, where the ceremony was to be performed, was crowded. It had been Mr. Ellis's idea to give a general invitation, and all of Sassajack was there—and more.

There were at least a dozen strangers. These men were supposed to be from neighboring mining camps, and did not attract general attention.

All was ready, and the bridal couples took their places before the minister. Isabel and Ruth looked remarkably well, and Rube and Gabe were as manly and happy-looking as any one could desire.

Yank Yellowbird, for once separated from his long rifle, looked on and caressed his beard in a calmly satisfied way.

The minister gazed over his spectacles at the young folks in a fatherly fashion, and then the ceremony began.

Six words he spoke, and then—

There was the rustle of female garments, and a woman, who had been quietly moving forward, came to a halt a few feet away.

"Stop!" she imperiously cried. "I forbid the marriage!"

She threw up the veil which had covered her face.

Sybilla stood revealed.

Gabriel Dix heard that voice; he turned a startled glance upon her, and then staggered back and stood as motionless, and almost as white, as a marble statue.

The minister fixed a shocked look upon the speaker.

"What does this mean?" he demanded.

"It means," replied Sybilla, her voice ringing out clearly, "that one of these noble grooms-elect is not situated so as to carry on this wicked ceremony. He is already married, and I am his wife! Gabriel Dix is my legal husband."

And she pointed one finger toward the pale, miserable Samson of Sassajack.

Not a word answered any one, but the silence was more expressive than words. Every gaze was bent either upon Gabe or Sybilla, and those who looked at the former, found more reason for alarm in his appearance than in the words they had heard.

He was literally overwhelmed.

Ellis grasped his arm.

"Speak!" cried the elder man. "Deny this infamous falsehood!"

"He dares not!" retorted Sybilla, with a reckless laugh. "He knows it is true, and I can prove it."

Gabe aroused as from a terrible nightmare.

"You can not prove it!" he hoarsely answered.

"You think so because you lately destroyed a certain paper," was the quick response, "but you are foiled, after all. Look! here is my marriage certificate!"

She flaunted a document before Ellis's eyes, but it was Gabe who looked at it most eagerly. Ay!—it was the marriage certificate of Gabriel Dix and Sybilla Handiboe, so like the paper he had bought from Tecumseh Tubbs that he could not doubt that he had been made the victim of a cunning forgery.

He could surmise why; it was to lure him on to a step the maddest he could have taken.

The minister was a well-meaning man, but one inclined to give his sympathy to a woman in every case, often prematurely. He now bent his gaze upon the certificate; he examined it narrowly; then he lifted his head and revealed a stern face.

"In the absence of irrefutable proof," he said, "I must say that this paper appears to be perfectly genuine. If so, yonder man stands condemned of attempted bigamy!"

He pointed to Gabe.

"That is it, exactly," triumphantly agreed Sybilla. "He is a bigamist, and, as such, I demand his arrest."

Rube Herndon grasped his partner's arm.

"Have you no word to say for yourself?" he asked.

"He can say none!" mocked Sybilla.

"Wal, I kin!" loudly proclaimed a new voice.

"I've got a word ter say!"

And there stood Tecumseh Tubbs, grim and burly, his gaze fixed upon Sybilla, angrily and menacingly.

"I've got sev'ral words ter say," he added, "an' when I git through, ef you don't think the *bigamy* shoe b'longs on other feet, I—"

"This man is my discharged servant, with whom I quarreled," interrupted the woman, trying to carry it bravely, but showing perturbation. "He is not to be regarded for a moment."

"He is to be regarded!" retorted Rube Herndon, in a clear, penetrating voice. "Let the

man speak—there is time for us all, afterward."

"I won't tire any on ye," said Tecumseh, with his gaze still on Sybilla. "My facts I'll give in few words. Six months ago I met that woman. Certain things made her think me a man o' des-p'rit courage, an' she said she would be my wife ef I would help her git revenge on another man. We was married; we come hyar; Dix was p'inted out as the man she wanted ter ruin; an' I helped in her mean work until I made a dis-kivery."

"Gents, Sybilla did marry Dix, years ago, but it was no more legal than my weddin'. Years afore she ever seen Dix she married one Roger Belden, an' this man still lives. You know him as Brodhawk, the outlaw chief, an' thar he is this minute!"

Impetuously had these words been spoken, drowning Sybilla's attempted interruption, and at the end he leveled his finger at one of the previously-mentioned strangers.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

STEELBLADE SHOWS HIS HAND.

THERE was an instant stir among the strangers, but once more Tecumseh Tubbs's voice rung out loudly:

"Don't let a man leave the room! Brodhawk an' all his outlaws are hyar!"

In a moment the man whom he had pointed out as the outlaw chief threw off a wig and false beard, and the redoubtable Brodhawk stood revealed; another moment, and a revolver gleamed in each of his hands.

"Draw, my hearties!" he shouted, and then each of the so-called strangers drew revolvers and turned them upon the miners.

Their purpose was at once apparent. In number they were only one-fifth of the crowd, but they had counted on the surprise and their reckless courage to win the game. For common men to have ventured there would have been madness, for they had expected to engage in a fight when Sybilla made her charge, but Brodhawk had before then terrorized great odds alone, and his courage knew no bounds.

Unfortunately for him, there was one man there as brave and cool-headed as he.

A bony fist promptly shot out and felled the chief like an ox in the shambles, and, in a moment more Yank Yellowbird stood with one foot planted on Brodhawk's breast, and a revolver gleaming in each hand.

"Rally, neighbors!" cried the mountaineer, in a clear voice. "Down with the atrocious outlaws!"

There was magic in the example of the tall veteran; there was magic in the voice which moved the miners as the voice of a leader of men always will.

Promptly the men of Sassajack rallied; they sprung upon the enemy, and a desperate battle followed. For some time there was confusion, and the shouts of men, the terrified cries of women, the reports of revolvers and the sound of blows were mingled in a thrilling whole.

Then the conflict ceased, and it was to be seen that the outlaws, Brodhawk included, were prisoners. Yank's prompt action had defeated all of the outlaw's plans and hopes. Tecumseh Tubbs looked at Sybilla with a triumphant smile. He had not seen her meet Brodhawk at the new lair, but when the two did meet, and recognize each other, had decided to join hands again. Tecumseh was not long in finding grounds for jealousy. He played the spy, learned the truth, and sought revenge, but had patiently bided his time.

"I consait," said Yank, "that some explanations are egregiously needed. Tubbs, kin you prove that Sybilla an' Brodhawk—or Roger Belden, ef that's the atrocious insex's name—are man an' wife?"

"I heard them say it was unlucky that their marriage was on record in Chicago, as it took place years afore she met Gabe Dix."

"That's cheerin', by hurley! We kin now look up his pedigree. Rocky Mountain Samson, what hev you ter say? Speak out, an' eend the triberlation an' distress."

"What you have heard of me is true," Gabe hoarsely answered, "but I swear that I thought Sybilla dead."

"He did," averred Tecumseh. "Sybilla put up a job, a week ago, ter make him think so, so he would go ahead an' marry Isabel Rand. I helped her do it."

"Fool!" cried Sybilla, "will you hang yourself?"

"I don't keer ef I do," growled the man from Arkansas. "You played me false; I'll tell the hull truth now. Dix, 'twas me lost the ring in your shanty. I stole it from Sybilla. When I come ter your shanty I didn't know whose it was; I come merely as a thief, but got nothin', an' lost the ring. As fur how Parkman an' Jackingham got out o' jail—Sybilla, Steelblade an' me did it. We bribed the jailer."

"One word as to my past," interrupted Gabe. "I met Sybilla when I was young; I believed her good an' true; I married her and found her all that was evil; I left her, hoping never to see her again. Before Heaven, I have done no conscious harm."

"Laud o' Goshen! nobody thinks ye hev, lad," cheerfully declared Yank Yellowbird; "an' ef

the records at Chicago proves Sybilla an' Brodhawk ter be married, you'll soon be free an' yer pedigree clear."

Tecumseh Tubbs smiled darkly.

"He'll soon be free, anyhow!" the Arkansas man muttered, so low that few heard him.

"We've made a great ketch o' scamps," remarked Nevermiss, looking at the prisoners. "Parkman, ain't you an' Jackingham sorter sorry you come ter the weddin'? Egregious occasion, ain't it?"

The ex-owners of Claim 22 looked their wrath, but said nothing.

"Bradley," continued the mountaineer, "re-soom yer persition as sheriff, an' see that none o' these varmints git away. Thar are some p'int's still unsettled hyar."

The speaker turned, and as he did so a woman's startled cry rung through the hall. A thrilling scene was presented to Yank's gaze.

During the fight the women had drawn apart, and they still stood in a group. Toward this group a man had made his way. Entering the hall when the excitement was the greatest, he had skulked unnoticed through the crowd.

This man was Steelblade, the Knife-Thrower.

His treacherous, evil eyes, more than ever in ambush, were turned toward Isabel and Ruth, and his hand rested upon "Bright Eyes." He glided toward the girls: he reached a favorable position; and then he drew his knife and sprung forward, the weapon raised for a fatal blow.

A woman's scream!

The report of a revolver!

A heavy fall!

And then Steelblade lay writhing on the floor, and Sandy Whiskers stood above him, his burly form interposed, lion-like, to shield the girls, and his broad face convulsed with emotion.

Yank Yellowbird sprung forward.

"By hurley! you was jest in time, Sandy, an' I consait you've done for Steelhoss. Frien's, whar is the man who speaks ag'in' Sandy now? He's saved most precious lives. Sandy, you've done wal; you've done very wal; you've done most mighty wal, sir!"

A realization of the truth broke upon the miners, and one man, who had been the lone gold-digger's bitter foe, raised his voice in a shout:

"Three cheers fur Sandy Whiskers!"

They were given with a will.

Yank knelt by Steelblade's side.

"How is it with you?" the veteran asked.

The Knife-Thrower turned his black eyes full upon the questioner.

"I'm a dying man?" he replied, faintly but calmly.

"Looks like it, by hurley; but I can't 'magine why ye tried ter kill them gals, who never harmed ye."

"I could tell if I would—and why shouldn't I? My race is run, and I cannot help myself by keeping silent. It all came of Robert Bruce Rand's money. When his brother, Wallace—the father of Isabel and Ruth—was accused of trying to kill the rich man, neither Wallace nor Peter Todd, the servant, was guilty. It was still another relative, Harper Wicklow.

"Wicklow was a wild, roving fellow, at times sailor, often thief, and more than once murderer. He found me in Austraha, and I have been his tool, at times, ever since. Wicklow aspired to get Robert Rand's money, to which, after Wallace Rand and his daughters, he was heir. He plotted to kill all, and though none was killed, Robert Rand's escape was narrow! It was of this deed that Wallace Rand was unjustly accused.

"When Wallace was released, for want of proof against him, he wandered away with his daughters, and when Robert finally died, there was no clew to their whereabouts. Wicklow was resolved to have the money, and, investigating, found that Wallace was dead, but that his daughters, the real heirs, still lived. He hired me to kill them, and I came here to do it.

"Had I not delayed, my work would have been done, but I found Peter Todd here—known only as Sandy Whiskers—and, becoming interested in Sybilla's plot, I delayed action, for Peter Todd had never seen me, and did not know me.

"That's the whole story, and I have only one word more to say. Wallace Rand suspected his brother's servant, Todd, of having been the real attempted assassin; but, Todd was innocent. Wicklow alone was guilty. Todd you know as Sandy Whiskers, as I said before. He is a trifle weak-minded, but is an honest man, and as devoted to the girls—the last of the Rands—as a dog to its master."

Yank Yellowbird shook the hand of the vindicated man warmly.

"Sandy, old neighbor, I congratulate ye. Your pedigree is fully cleared—it is, by hurley!"

"I thank the marcfiful Providence!" replied Sandy Whiskers, his face working convulsively. "I got news o' Harper Wicklow's plot, an' come hyar ter foil it. I knew some assassin was hyar, but didn't know who; an' I thought at first it was Parkman. This mistake will explain how sort o' queer I acted the night o' the ball at the hotel, an' other times. Mebbe Steelblade is right, an' I ain't strong-minded; but I'm ready

any time ter lay down my life fur Wallace Rand's children!"

Rube Herndon took Ruth's hand and looked meaningly at Peter Todd. She understood, and moved forward quickly.

"Faithful old friend," she said, earnestly, "we know you as you are at last, and may Heaven bless you, even as Wallace Rand's children do!"

Isabel added her voice, an' Yank Yellowbird smiled with satisfaction.

"I consait things are comin' 'round all right, an' in a day or two I'll move on ter new scenes. It's nec'sary fur me ter keep movin', fur if I don't, the egregious newrol'gy gits hold on me an' makes it hard ter keep up the Yellowbird pedigree. Tribulations an' distresses seem about past, an' I'm glad ter see matters eend so wal—I be, by hurley!"

Sheriff Bradley approached.

"I'm mighty sorry," he said, nervously, "but Brodhawk and Sybilla hev slipped away an' escaped!"

Tecumseh Tubbs started as from a dream.

"Leave them ter me!" he said, hoarsely. "They won't go fur!"

He leaped out of the open window, and was heard hurrying away.

Steelblade lifted his knife.

"He will serve them as beserved me!" he muttered, faintly. "He is as true to his purpose as I am to 'Bright Eyes!'"

The speaker pressed his lips to the blade of the knife, and then sunk back, fainting from the loss of blood.

"It's a bad time fur the wicked an' trouble-some," decided Nevermiss, "an' I can't say I'm sorry. I don't like sech insex, an' I can't. I was born with antipathies, an' they will stick to me!"

The following morning Sybilla and Brodhawk were found lifeless, outside the town. Tecumseh Tubbs had kept his word, and used his revolver to fatal purpose. And from that day none of our other characters have seen the Arkansas man, nor heard from him.

Steelblade lived to sign a written, legal confession, and then died with "Bright Eyes" by his side.

Parkham and Jackingham received long sentences. Brodhawk's outlaws, disheartened by their leader's death, were heard of no more as a band.

In one of the Northwestern States live Rube Herndon and Gabe Dix, with their wives. We need scarcely say that the said wives are Ruth and Isabel respectively. It was found that Sybilla had for years—and long before she had met Gabe—been Brodhawk's wife. No legal steps were taken, for death had ended her career.

Near the persons before mentioned live Ellis and his wife, while Peter Todd, alias Sandy Whiskers, is in Gabe's service as assistant overseer of a great farm. Todd was fully vindicated, and his dog-like attachment to Isabel and Ruth continues. He still shows some peculiarities, but they are now better understood.

Yank Yellowbird left Golden Moon Valley to resume the old, wandering life he liked so well. To him there was no place like mountain and prairie in their wildest aspect. Once, only, did he afterward visit Sassajack. He found the place renamed, elevated to the dignity of a city, and ruled by a certain Mayor Bradley.

It was the ex-sheriff, still in office, despite his many mistakes and vows to retire from public life. He entertained Yank cordially for one day, and then the tall mountaineer shouldered his rifle and went back to the wilderness.

THE END.

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